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SALAR

DIGITAL ENGLISH DAILY, BENGALURU

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Musk's DOGE cuts $21M for 'voter turnout' in India

BJP terms the grant as 'external interference' in elections

NEW YORK, 16 FEB

The US Department of Government Efficiency led by billionaire Elon Musk has announced a series of expenditure cuts, including USD 21 million allocated for "voter turnout in India."

US President Donald Trump chose Musk to head the new Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) last month. Tasked with improving governance and curbing wasteful expenditures, the DOGE in a post on X on Saturday announced cancelling many programmes costing hundreds of millions of taxpayers' dollars.

The department said, "US taxpayer dollars were going to be spent on the following items, all (of) which have been cancelled..."

The list included USD 486 million in grants to the "Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening" including USD 21 million for "voter turnout in India" and USD 22 million for "inclusive and participatory political process" in Moldova. No further details on the funding were given in the post.

Reacting to the post, senior BJP leader Amit Malviya termed the grant as 'external interference' in India's elections. He questioned who the beneficiary

Amit Malviya **PHOTO: PTI**

was, asserting that it was 'not the ruling party for sure'.

He claimed that the now cancelled programme was a pointer to the previous Congress-led UPA government allegedly enabling infiltration of Indian institutions by forces opposed to the country's interests.

This comes days after Prime Minister Narendra Modi's official visit to the US, during which he held talks with President Trump, as well as Musk.

The SpaceX CEO met Modi with his family, including three children. In its post, the DOGE also cancelled USD 29 million allocated to "strengthening political landscape in Bangladesh", as well as USD 20 million for "fiscal federalism" in Nepal and USD 19 million for "biodiversity conversation" in the Himalayan nation.

It also announced cutting a USD 10 million grant for "Mozambique voluntary medical male circumcision", USD 2.3 million for "strengthening independent voices in Cambodia", USD 32 million to the Prague Civil Society Centre, USD 40 million for "gender equality and women empowerment hub" and USD 14 million for "improving public procurement" in Serbia, among other expenditure cuts. It also included USD 47 million for "improving learning outcomes in Asia".

The DOGE has been put in charge of overseeing workforce reduction across the government, and as part of that, Musk announced that he would shut down USAID, which is responsible for humanitarian efforts around the globe. According to USAID officials on 7 February, all USAID humanitarian work worldwide had been stopped, reported ABC News. The agency's website was shut down before Musk's announcement. Later, a Trump-nominated judge announced a temporary restraining order that prevents the president and DOGE from placing 2,200 employees on administrative leave. *—PTI*

>>>More on Pages 3 & 6

Indians deported from the US being escorted by the police as they leave the airport upon their arrival in Amritsar on Sunday **PHOTO: PTI**

US deportees on 2nd flight back home handcuffed

CHANDIGARH, 16 FEB

A US military aircraft carrying 116 illegal Indian immigrants landed at the Amritsar International Airport late Saturday night, with one deportee claiming they were handcuffed and their legs were chained during the journey.

Reportedly Sikh youths were not allowed to tie their turbans, returning with open hair.

The C-17 aircraft, which landed at the airport around 11.35pm on Saturday, was the second batch of Indians to be deported by the Donald Trump administration as part of its crackdown on illegal immigrants after 5 February.

Daljit Singh, who was among the deportees who reached Amritsar on Saturday night, claimed they were handcuffed with their legs chained during the journey. "Our legs were chained and hands were also cuffed," Daljit told reporters in Hoshiarpur.

Saurabh of Chandiwala village in Ferozepur said, "We were handcuffed and chained, put in the plane and sent back. They treated us very badly and humiliated us."

Two youths, Sandeep Singh alias Sunny and Pradeep Singh, among the deportees, were arrested by the police in a murder case upon their landing in Amritsar.

They were wanted in a murder case registered in Rajpura in 2023.

After immigration and background check, the deportees hailing from Punjab were taken to their homes in police vehicles at around 4.30am on Sunday.

The Haryana government also made transportation arrangements for the deportees from the state. A third plane carrying 157 deportees is expected to land on Sunday, sources said. A third flight carrying illegal Indian immigrants is set to land in Amritsar on Sunday. *—PTI*

>>>More on Pages 4 & 5

Rubio says Iran's 'instability' must be addressed

Washington DC, 16 Feb

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio said on Sunday that he agreed with his host, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, that Iran is the single greatest source of instability in the Middle East and it must be addressed. During their joint press conference, Rubio and Netanyahu added that the Islamic Republic poses a serious threat to regional and global security "Israel and America stand shoulder to shoulder in countering the threat of Iran," Netanyahu said. "We agreed that the ayatollahs must not have nuclear weapons and also agreed that Iran's aggression in the region must be rolled back." Speaking about Syria, Lebanon and the ongoing Israel-Palestine conflict, Rubio said "The common theme in all of these challenges is Iran. It is the greatest single force of instability in the region." He added that Iran is "behind every terrorist group, behind every act of violence, behind every destabilising activity, behind everything that threatens peace and stability for millions of people" throughout the region. When he speaks of Iran, he stresses, he is referring to the regime. And the people of Iran, he says, "are victims of that regime." *—Agencies*

City to face early summer, mercury to hit 34°C in Feb

BENGALURU, 16 FEB

Bengaluru days are set to get warmer in the coming days with the weather agency predicting temperatures to touch 34 degree Celsius, increasing the average temperature by 1.4 degree Celsius. IMD said City may witness the early onset of summer, saying it may arrive by mid-Feb. Typical summer sets in by the first week of March in the city. The unusual variation in maximum temperature, according to IMD meteorologists, is due to the absence of northerly winds. The City's temperatures were just a few degrees less than Kalaburgi and Raichur, the hottest regions in the first few days of the month *—Salar News*

BJP to decide on next Delhi CM today

NEW DELHI, 16 FEB

Delhi govt formation: In a major development regarding government formation in Delhi, the BJP Legislature Party will meet on 17 February to elect the new Chief Minister, said sources. According to sources, the swearing-in ceremony is scheduled for February 18 and is likely to be a low-key event. The BJP's legislative party will meet on meet on 17 February to elect the Delhi Chief Minister, sources said. The swearing in ceremony is scheduled for 18 February and is likely to be a low key even. Top contenders include Parvesh Verma, Ramesh Bidhuri, Manoj Tiwari, Kapil Mishra, Ashish Sood, Rekha Gupta, and Vijender Gupta. In the recent Delhi elections the BJP secured a vote share of 45.56 per cent and won 48 seats. *—Agencies*

MAHA KUMBH CHAOS

Delhi stn overcrowded hours after stampede

NEW DELHI, 16 FEB

A day after a deadly stampede at the New Delhi Railway Station claimed 18 lives, the station remained overcrowded on Sunday, with thousands of passengers struggling to board trains amid heavy rush.

Despite additional measures, the influx of passengers — several of them Maha Kumbh pilgrims travelling to Prayagraj — has continued with the sheer volume of travellers making the situation difficult to handle for authorities.

With 1,500 general tickets being issued per hour, the passenger surge continues to strain resources.

Prayagraj special trains are departing at more than double their capacity, with people clinging to doors, stuffing themselves into packed compartments and even climbing through train windows.

At the New Delhi-Bihar Sampark Kranti Express, which does not even travel to Prayagraj, the rush was so intense that passengers pushed and shoved their way into the train. RPF had to physically close doors to prevent further overcrowding.

A girl aged around 15 years was seen crying inside the overcrowded train due to suffocation, while her mother, who couldn't board the train due to the rush wept helplessly. "The number of people inside the train was so high that no one could even move. If anything had gone wrong inside, it would have been impossible to get out," said a stranded passenger.

Additional RPF personnel have been deployed, and senior officials are making regular rounds of the station to monitor the situation. The foot-over bridges and staircases, where Saturday's disaster unfolded, remain crowded as pilgrims rush toward their trains. The rush to Prayagraj is expected to continue for days, making crowd control a constant challenge. *—PTI*

>>>More on Pages 4

Passengers board an overcrowded train for Prayagraj's Maha Kumbh at the New Delhi railway; Relatives of 38-year-old Pinky Devi, who died in a stampede, mourn her death, at Sangam Vihar on Sunday **PHOTOS: PTI**

People vandalise special train after failing to board

AMETHI, 16 FEB

Two coaches of the special train running for Maha Kumbh were vandalised by passengers at the Guru Gorakhnath Dham railway station here after they were unable to board due to locked doors, officials said on Sunday.

The incident occurred around 1.15 am on Sunday when Kumbh Special Train number 04255, travelling from Lucknow to Prayagraj, arrived at the station. According to the Government Railway Police (GRP), nearly 300 devotees were waiting to board the train. However, passengers inside allegedly kept the doors locked, preventing new passengers from entering.

Angry over this, the devotees broke nearly a dozen windows of two train coaches. GRP Circle Officer Amit Singh confirmed that some people sustained minor injuries in the scuffle, and the Railway Protection Force (RPF) has registered a case. *—PTI*

GOVT STAYS MUM

Tamil magazine site blocked over PM cartoon

CHENNAI, 16 FEB

Following BJP's complaint to the Centre against a Tamil digital magazine over allegedly publishing a cartoon showing Prime Minister Narendra Modi in an offensive manner, the magazine said its portal is inaccessible to its readers. Chief Minister MK Stalin condemned the blocking of the website.

The magazine said in a social media post that there have been numerous reports stating that the Vikatan website has been blocked by the central government. It said: "Many users from different locations have reported that they are unable to access the Vikatan website. However, as of now, there has been no official announcement from the central government regarding the blocking of the Vikatan website."

Asserting its commitment to freedom of expression, the magazine said it was trying to ascertain the reasons behind the blocking of its website.

Chief Minister Stalin said blocking the media outlet for its opinions went against democratic norms and condemned it. "This is an example of the BJP's fascist nature," he said and urged the Centre to restore the website.

The complaint was filed after the magazine published a cartoon criticising the BJP government over the issue of Indians being handcuffed and deported from the US. Tamil Nadu BJP president Annamalai on 15 February wrote to Union Minister of State for Information and Broadcasting, L Murugan, regarding the "cover picture aimed at defaming Prime M inister Modi" and termed it offensive. *—PTI*

PHOTO: VIKATAN

Dy CM DK Shivakumar on Sunday said that the government was spending Rs 1,700 crore for roads white topping in Bengaluru, aimed at creating international standards.He inspected the quality and the progress of various road development works in the City
PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD

No need to 'misuse' CM's name: DKS

DyCM says Cong wants CM for all elections and he will complete full term

BENGALURU, 16 FEB

Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar has firmly stated that Chief Minister Siddaramaiah is the unequivocal leader of the Congress party in Karnataka. Shivakumar's comments come in response to party members advocating for Siddaramaiah to complete his full term amid growing speculation about a potential leadership change later in the year.

Addressing reporters, Shivakumar, who also serves as the state Congress President, emphasised, "Siddaramaiah is our Chief Minister, our leader. We want him for all elections, from zilla panchayat to the Assembly and parliamentary polls." He asserted that there was no need for some leaders to "misuse" Siddaramaiah's name, reminding observers that he has previously held the position twice and is currently performing well.

Asked about statements made by party leaders, Shivakumar said, "there is no confusion, Congress party is observing everything, every day." Siddaramaiah, having resumed office in May 2023 following a decisive victory for the Congress in the Assembly elections, is facing pressure from certain party factions advocating for his continuation as Chief Minister.

KPCC president DK Shivakumar welcomes Supreme Court's senior advocate Brijesh Kalappa and former Mandya MP LR Shivarame Gowda, his son Chetan Gowda who rejoined the Congress party
PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD

This comes despite Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge's recent admonition to colleagues to focus on governance rather than issuing public statements.

The appointment of the current Deputy Chief Minister followed intense competition between Siddaramaiah and Shivakumar for the top post after last year's election. Reports of a "rotational chief minister" agreement. *—PTI*

DyCM asks Congress to prep for BBMP polls

BENGALURU, 16 FEB

Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar urged party leaders and workers on Sunday to begin preparations for the local body elections in the state, including those for the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP).

Shivakumar, said this after inducting former MP LR Shivarame Gowda, and party's former spokesperson and Supreme Court advocate Brijesh Kalappa, back into the party.

"I want to tell all our state leaders, we need to prepare for local body polls, there are chances of court issuing us directions, and already reservations and other preparations are on," Shivakumar said.

"Elections may be declared any time, we have to make necessary preparations. I will be constituting separate committees region wise for the local body polls," he added.

Regarding preparations for BBMP polls, he said, the legislature panel reviewing the Greater Bengaluru Governance Bill, headed by MLA Rizwan Arshad, is expected to submit its report, they have gathered public opinion.

LR Shivarame Gowda, who was also Member of Parliament from JD(S), before joining BJP in 2023 while Brijesh Kalappa earlier served as Congress' national level spokesperson before joining AAP.

Shivakumar also said they have requested for building over a hundred Congress offices in the state. *—PTI*

7 lifers released early from Kalaburagi jail

KALABURAGI, 16 FEB

Seven prisoners serving life sentences at Kalaburagi Central Prison were released early on Saturday following a government directive acknowledging their good conduct. The inmates had completed 14 years of their sentences for various criminal offences. Among those released were Shivappa from Marakandanhalli village in Manvi Taluk, Raichur district; Manikya from Shankargaon, Solapur district; Shivaraj and Anand Uppar from Bandempalli village in Sedam Taluk; Anjilappa from Mudhol village, Sedam; Anand from Kon Malkhed in Bhalki Taluk; and Sangappa from Kadehalli village in Chittapur Taluk. During the release ceremony, Kalaburagi Central Prison Superintendent Dr Anita R. and other prison officials presented the freed prisoners with certificates and offered their best wishes for their new beginnings. *—Salar News*

Yoga guru drowns in Cauvery river at Kollegal

MYSURU, 16 FEB

A yoga guru tragically drowned in the Cauvery river near Dasanapura in Kollegal taluk on Sunday. The deceased has been identified as Nagaraju, a 62-year-old priest from the Lakshminarayan temple in Kollegal town. According to local police, Nagaraju had gone to the river to perform yoga asanas and take a holy dip alongside his friends. After enjoying some time swimming, he was later found floating in the water when his companions noticed he was missing. Emergency services were alerted, and his body was recovered with the assistance of his friends. It was subsequently taken to the Kollegal sub-general hospital for a postmortem examination. Kollegal rural police have lodged a case and initiated an investigation into the incident, pending the postmortem report to determine the cause of death. *—Salar News*

Fire breaks out at Palace Grounds, no casualties reported

BENGALURU, 16 FEB

A fire broke out at a unit storing decoration materials and waste items at Palace Grounds on Sunday evening, sending thick smoke billowing into the air. The fire, which started around 5:30pm, was swiftly brought under control by local police and fire department officials. Fortunately, no casualties were reported. After extinguishing the flames, firefighters inspected the site, but the cause of the fire remains unclear. Authorities have stated that a detailed investigation is underway, with further inspections likely to continue on Monday due to low visibility. *—Salar News*

Karnataka tops India list in panchayat power devolution

BENGALURU, 16 FEB

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah announced that Karnataka has secured the top position in the devolution of power to Panchayats, according to a study conducted by the Indian Institute of Public Administration (IIPA) in collaboration with the Ministry of Panchayati Raj.

In a post on 'X', he expressed pride in this recognition, stating, "Karnataka has been ranked 1st in the devolution of power to Panchayats, leading the nation in financial autonomy and accountability." The state achieved a score of 72.23 on the Devolution Index, showcasing effective financial decentralisation and the timely release of funds, alongside the efficient utilisation of grants

from the 15th Finance Commission.

Siddaramaiah highlighted the pivotal role of the Rural Development and Panchayati Raj Department, led by Minister Priyank Kharge, in equipping Panchayats with the resources and autonomy essential for promoting rural advancement.

"Decentra lisation is not just a concept – it is a lived reality in Karnataka," he emphasised, noting that a strong Panchayat system fosters rural development, participatory democracy, and inclusive growth. Following Karnataka in the rankings were Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, and Uttar Pradesh, according to the report titled "Status of Devolution of Panchayat in States: An Indicative Evidence-Based Ranking.". Top six states got their rankings on the basis of index scores of Karnataka (72.23), Kerala (70.59), Tamil Nadu (68.38), Maharashtra (61.44), Uttar Pradesh (60.8), and Gujarat (58.26), according to the report titled "Status of devolution of panchayat in states: an indicative evidence based ranking", it said. *—PTI*

WALK FOR PEACE

Buddhist monks participate in a procession in Bengaluru on Sunday advocating for peace. The event was organised by the Mahabodhi Society
PHOTO: MOHAMMED ASAD

CM urges Deve Gowda to protect irrigation interests of State

BENGALURU, 16 FEB

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah has accused former Prime Minister HD Deve Gowda and his party, the JD(S), of acting as mouthpieces for the Central government, while welcoming Gowda's offer to collaborate non-partisanly regarding irrigation injustices faced by the state.

Siddaramaiah responded to Gowda's recent remarks about engaging in dialogue to secure justice for Karnataka in irrigation projects. He questioned whether Gowda's political compromises, particularly concerning his son HD Kumaraswamy's ministerial role in the Central cabinet, have negatively impacted his commitment to the state.

Acknowledging Gowda's past efforts in advocating for Karnataka's interests, Siddaramaiah noted that many Kannadigas now view the JD(S) as biased towards the Central government. He recalled their joint efforts in September 2016 during a critical Supreme Court ruling

Siddaramaiah responded to Deve Gowda's recent remarks about engaging in dialogue to secure justice for Karnataka in irrigation projects ***PHOTO: ANI***

concerning the Cauvery water dispute.

Siddaramaiah lamented that the Modi-led government was neglecting Karnataka's needs, particularly regarding the Kalasa Nale and Banduri Naale Diversion Projects, both awaiting Central approval. He urged Gowda to leverage his position to support these initiatives.

While commending Gowda's concerns regarding the linking of Krishna and Cauvery rivers, Siddaramaiah requested his cooperation in expediting unfinished irrigation projects. He concluded by appealing to Gowda to rise above party politics and advocate for the collective interests of Karnataka. *—PTI*

CM arranges air ambulance for farmer leader

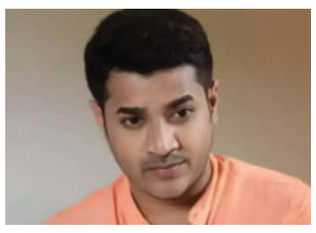
BENGALURU, 16 FEB

Farmer leader Kuruburu Shanthakumar, who was seriously injured in an accident near Patiala in Punjab, was brought to Bengaluru on Sunday by air ambulance on the instructions of Chief Minister Siddaramaiah, the his office said in a statement on Sunday.

Shanthakumar has been admitted to Manipal Hospital in the city. Siddaramaiah wished Shanthakumar a speedy recovery, a statement from CMO said. Shanthakumar was injured in an accident that occurred three days ago and was undergoing treatment at a hospital in Patiala. He is said to have suffered a serious spinal injury. As soon as he came to know about the matter, Siddaramaiah had instructed the officials to bring Shanthakumar to Bengaluru. Meanwhile, Karnataka Bhavan, Delhi's Resident Commissioner Imkongla Jamir was in constant touch with the Chief Secretary of the Punjab government and the doctors at the Patiala hospital.
—Salar News with Agencies

Another harassment case filed against TV actor

BENGALURU, 16 FEB



- Balappa's ex-wife, Manjushree, also filed a complaint alleging threats after sending him a legal notice. The Sarjapur police registered a NCR in that case.

Kannada television actor **Charith Balappa** has been booked in yet another harassment case, following a complaint filed by a 37-year-old woman from Annapoorneshwari Nagar. According to the woman, she and Balappa were in a romantic relationship after meeting during a TV serial shoot in Bengaluru. However, Balappa ended the relationship and later married Manjushree.

After his divorce, Balappa allegedly reinitiated contact, professing his love and attempting to coerce the woman into a physical relationship. When she refused, he reportedly blackmailed her, threatening to release private photographs.

The woman first approached Amruthahalli police, but due to jurisdictional issues, the case was transferred to Annapoorneshwari Nagar police. Authorities noted that Balappa and the woman initially became acquainted through the serial shoot in Bengaluru. This case adds to several prior allegations against Balappa. In December 2024, a 29-year-old actress filed a complaint accusing him of sexual harassment and blackmail involving private videos. Balappa's ex-wife, Manjushree, also filed a complaint alleging threats after sending him a legal notice. The Sarjapur police registered a Non-Cognizable Report (NCR) in that case. *—Salar News*

Man arrested for forging CM's official note to get job

BENGALURU, 16 FEB

A man has been arrested for forging an official note from the Chief Minister's Office (CMO) to secure a government posting in Karnataka. Raghavendra, the accused, allegedly created a fake recommendation letter to influence the appointment of a Karnataka Administrative Service (KAS) officer. The forged document was used to manipulate the appointment process.

The Vidhana Soudha Secretariat filed a complaint, prompting the police to register a case and arrest Raghavendra, who hails from Ranebennur in Haveri district.

Sources revealed that Raghavendra had previously worked as a personal assistant to several MLAs and was allegedly involved in a money-for-posting scheme, accepting bribes to facilitate government positions.

PHOTO: FREEPIK

- Sources revealed that Raghavendra had previously worked as a personal assistant to several MLAs and was allegedly involved in a money-for-posting scheme.

A detailed investigation is underway to uncover any accomplices. *—Salar News*

KABINI WATER PROJECT

Mysuru to get additional 40 MLD wate

MYSURU, 16 FEB

Mysuru will get an additional 40 million litres per day (MLD) water later this year, as Kabini Drinking Water project's II Stage is 90 per cent completed.

A team of officials, led by Mysuru district in-charge minister HC Mahadevappa and accompanied by Chamundeshwari MLA GT Devegowda, KEA chairman Ayub Khan, Mysuru DC Lakshmikanth Reddy, former MUDA commissioner Rajiv and MCC Commissioner Sheik Tanvir Asif on Sunday visited the project site at Bidaragodu in Nanjangud taluk and reviewed the works.

Mahadevappa said that both MCC and Mysur Urban Development Authority have decided to upgrade the facility to ensure uninterrupted water supply to south-western parts of Mysuru city by drawing more water from Kabini river.

The project will help supply 180 MLD of water to both MUDA-formed layouts and MUDA-approved private layouts ***PHOTO: X***

Fom Bidaragodu Jackwell, water will be pumped to Kembalu Pumping Station, where it will be chlorinated and pumped to Udbur unit and then supplied to Mysuru city. The entire upgradation project was taken up at a cost of Rs 150 crore.

The project will help supply 180 MLD of water to both MUDA-formed layouts and MUDA-approved private layouts, including RT Nagar, JP Nagar, University Layout, Netaji Subash Chandra Bose Nagar and residential layouts along the ring road.

The team also visited Bidaragudu Jackwell point, which has 180 MLD water pumping capacity. Out of this, only 60 MLD is being supplied to parts of Mysuru city and MUDA has planned to utilise the remaining 120 MLD for feeding water to MUDA and private layouts, as suggested by the urban development minister. *—Salar News*

Kuki-Zo MLAs hopeful of peace in Manipur

IMPHAL, 16 FEB

Kuki-Zo MLAs of Manipur have expressed hope that the Centre would lay out a "comprehensive political roadmap" for peace and justice, following the imposition of President's rule in the strife-torn state. In a statement, 10 MLAs – seven BJP legislators, two Kuki Peoples' Alliance MLAs and one independent – stated that they also look forward to measures to end the sufferings of those affected by the ethnic conflict and internally displaced. "We... while acknowledging the Centre's decision to place the Assembly under Suspended Animation express hope that the Centre would lay out a comprehensive political roadmap for peace and justice under a negotiated settlement," the statement said. *—PTI*

LDF, UDF faking rivalry in Kerala: BJP's Javadekar

T'PURAM, 16 FEB

Senior BJP leader Prakash Javadekar on Sunday slammed both the CPI(M)-led LDF and the Congress-headed UDF, accusing them of pretending to be rivals in Kerala while maintaining friendly ties elsewhere. In a post on his X account, Javadekar, who is also party's Kerala prabhari, wrote: "Shashi Tharoor's praise of Pinarayi Vijayan and UDF's declaration of joint protest with LDF, has once again proved that both LDF and UDF are friends all over and put up a mock fight in Kerala." His post came in the wake of a political storm triggered in the state over Congress MP Tharoor's recent article in an English daily, where he praised Kerala's entrepreneurial growth under the LDF government. "Voters of Kerala will teach them a lesson for this deception," said Javadekar.*—PTI*

Mohan Bhagwat emphasises unity of Hindu society

BARDHAMAN, 16 FEB

RSS Chief Mohan Bhagwat on Sunday emphasised the importance of uniting the Hindu society as it is the "responsible" society in the country that believes unity itself embodies diversity. Addressing an RSS programme at SAI Ground in Bardhaman, he said, "People often ask why we focus only on Hindu society, and my answer is that the responsible society of the country is Hindu society." "Today is not a special event. Those unaware of the Sangh often wonder what it wants. If I had to answer, I would say the Sangh seeks to organise Hindu society because it is the responsible society of the country," Bhagwat said. He also stressed the importance of accepting the world's diversity. *—PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

Don't back Article 370 abrogation: Mehbooba to Omar

SRINAGAR, 16 FEB

Peoples Democratic Party president Mehbooba Mufti on Sunday asked Chief Minister Omar Abdullah to refrain from endorsing the Centre's abrogation of Articles 370 and 35A in the formulation of business rules for the Jammu and Kashmir Assembly. The former chief minister warned that such a move would legitimise the "illegal and unconstitutional" actions taken by the BJP-led central government to abrogate Articles 370 and 35A. In a strongly worded statement, the PDP president said despite the Supreme Court's ruling in favour of the Centre's decision, several legal experts believe that Article 370 cannot be abrogated by any authority, including Parliament. Mufti also reminded the BJP-led Union government of the understanding it showed during the peak of unrest in Jammu and Kashmir. *—PTI*

Jaishankar, Omani EAM discuss trade, investment

The two leaders unveiled logo for 70 years of diplomatic ties

MUSCAT, 16 FEB

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar on Sunday held wide-ranging discussions with his Omani counterpart Badr Albusaidi on bilateral cooperation in trade, investment and energy security.

Jaishankar is in the Omani capital here to attend the 8th Indian Ocean Conference.

"Delighted to meet FM @badralbusaidi of Oman this morning. Appreciate his personal efforts in successfully hosting the 8th Indian Ocean Conference," Jaishankar posted on X.

"Held wide-ranging discussions on our cooperation in trade, investment and energy security," he said.

The two leaders jointly released the logo celebrating the 70th anniversary of the diplomatic relations.

They also jointly released a book titled 'Mandvi to Muscat: Indian Community and the Shared History of India and Oman'.

"Good to meet FM @araghchi of Iran this afternoon. Spoke about our bilateral ties and developments in the region," he said in a post on X.

Jaishankar also held "warm" talks with Dato Erywan Pehin Yusof, Foreign Minister of Brunei.

Foreign Minister of Oman Sayyid Badr bin Hamad bin Hamood Albusaidi with External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar release the book Mandvi to Muscat **PHOTO: PTI**

"A warm conversation with Brunei FM Dato Erywan Pehin Yusof this morning. Followed up on PM @narendramodi's September 2024 Brunei visit outcomes. Appreciate his insights on the region and support for India-ASEAN partnership," he said in a post on X.

Jaishankar met his Bhutanese counterpart DN Dhungyel and held talks about strengthening the bilateral partnership.

"A pleasure talking with @ FMBhutan D. N. Dhungyel in Muscat today. Our discussion focused on advancing our bilateral and regional cooperation. Underlined the dynamism of our unique and time-tested partnership," he posted on X.

The minister also met Sri Lanka's former president Ranil Wickremesinghe on the sidelines of the Indian Ocean Conference.

At the conference, Jaishankar called the Indian Ocean a "global lifeline" and urged countries in the region to look out for each other, supplement their strengths and coordinate their policies to fulfil its development, connectivity, maritime and security aspirations.

The conference was hosted by Oman, which is home to a sizeable Indian community totalling approximately 664,783 individuals as of August 2024, according to the Government of Oman. *—PTI*

AFTER US CANCELS FUNDING

Cong aided foreign interference in elections: BJP

NEW DELHI, 16 FEB

- He remarked that those questioning the "transparent and inclusive" process of appointing India's Election Commissioner seemed unperturbed by foreign influence in the electoral body

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has accused the Congress party of enabling foreign interference in India's electoral processes after the cancellation of a US-funded programme aimed at increasing voter turnout in the country. Amit Malviya, head of BJP's IT department, claimed that the previous Congress-led UPA government facilitated the infiltration of Indian institutions by entities opposed to national interests.

Malviya took to X, stating, "It is becoming increasingly evident that the Congress-led UPA systematically enabled the infiltration of India's institutions by forces opposed to the nation's interests—those who seek to weaken India at every opportunity." He specifically pointed fingers at billionaire investor George Soros, whom he labelled a "known associate" of the Congress party.

Malviya referenced a Memorandum of Understanding signed by the Election Commission in 2012 with the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, an organisation linked to Soros' Open Society Foundation and primarily funded by USAID. He remarked that those questioning the "transparent and inclusive" process of appointing India's Election Commissioner seemed unperturbed by foreign influence in the electoral body. The recent cancellation of several US programmes, announced by the Department of Government Efficiency, included USD486 million for the "Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening," which encompassed USD21 million allocated for boosting voter turnout in India. He asserted, "This definitely is external interference in India's electoral process. Who gains from this? Not the ruling party for sure!". *—PTI*

Tharoor says he praised Kerala startup growth, not Left govt

T'PURAM, 16 FEB

Congress MP Shashi Tharoor on Sunday clarified that he did not praise the CPI(M)-led government in Kerala, but instead highlighted the state's progress in the startup sector.

Speaking to reporters here, Tharoor said that his article in an English daily did not contain any political references. He emphasised that his focus was solely on Kerala's growth in entrepreneurship and innovation, aiming to highlight the state's development in that specific area.

Tharoor's response followed the political storm triggered by his article in the English daily, where he praised Kerala's entrepreneurial growth under the LDF government. While his party questioned the basis of his claims, the CPI(M) welcomed them.

Shashi Tharoor **PHOTO: ANI**

Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan attacked the opposition stating that Tharoor's article had debunked the false propaganda spread by the Congress-led UDF.

However, responding to the issue, KPCC president K Sudhakaran accused the Left government of inflating small enterprise figures, but did not mention Tharoor by name.

The Congress leader also clarified that he does not believe that the overall industrial environment in Kerala has changed. Kerala is still facing a major economic crisis, with 80 per cent of state PSUs running at a loss, he stated. Responding to statements about his CWC member post, Tharoor stated that no one has demanded his resignation from the CWC or brought the issue before the party high command. "If such a demand arises, will look into it at that time," he said. *—PTI*

Cong: BJP running smear campaign against Gogoi

NEW DELHI, 16 FEB

The Congress party has accused the BJP and Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma of engaging in an "atrocious smear campaign" against Congress leader Gaurav Gogoi, amidst allegations of corruption. Congress General Secretary Jairam Ramesh stated that legal action is being initiated, labelling the campaign as "character assassination."

Ramesh contended that Gogoi's victory in the Jorhat Lok Sabha seat, despite heavy campaigning against him, is the catalyst for the attacks.Sarma, countering the allegations, mentioned that a police case may be filed and a special investigation team constituted to probe alleged Pakistan links concerning Gogoi's British wife, Elizabeth Colburn.

Himanta Biswa Sarma **PHOTO: ANI**

Gogoi said BJP was adopting extreme measures to defame him and his family, asserting that he would take appropriate legal action in the matter, while penning a letter in Assamese addressed to his wife, assuring her that truth shall prevail. *—PTI*

Brief exchange of fire along LoC in J&K's Poonch

JAMMU, 16 FEB

A brief exchange of fire took place along the Line of Control (LoC) in the Poonch district of Jammu and Kashmir on Sunday, security officials said.

They said an Indian Army post came under fire from a forested area across the LoC around 11.30 am in Gulpur sector. They said soldiers retaliated and the exchange of fire lasted for a very brief period.

There was no damage on the Indian side. They said it was not immediately clear whether the Pakistan army was behind the firing, or it was terrorists hiding in the forests and waiting for an opportunity to sneak in. *—PTI*

'INDIA'S FUTURE HANDCUFFED'

Indian Youth Congress activists protest against Prime Minister Narendra Modi over deportation of illegal Indian immigrants from US, in Amritsar, on Sunday **~PHOTO: PTI**

Stalin slams Pradhan over NEP, 3-language policy funding rider

CHENNAI, 16 FEB

Chief Minister MK Stalin on Sunday accused Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan of "blackmail" for allegedly taking a stand that Tamil Nadu would not be provided funds till such time it accepted the National Education Policy (NEP) and the three-language formula.

Accusing Pradhan of "blackmail" for his alleged stand that Tamil Nadu would not be provided education related funds by the Centre till such time the state accepted the three-language policy, the Chief Minister termed it as unacceptable, and Tamil people would not tolerate it.

The state sought its due, from the Centre which is its right and if the central minister spoke arrogantly as if the state claimed his personal wealth, then, in that case, Delhi would have to witness the trait of the Tamil people, he said. Stalin wanted Pradhan to specify the constitutional provision that made mandatory the three language policy of English, the respective regional language and Hindi. States constitute the Indian union and education is on the concurrent list of the Constitution and hence, the union government cannot claim it to be their exclusive domain, he added. *—PTI*

Kumbh is meaningless: Lalu sparks controversy

PATNA, 16 FEB

RJD supremo Lalu Prasad on Sunday sparked controversy with his remarks dubbing the Maha Kumbh as "meaningless", as he blamed the Railways for the stampede in New Delhi that claimed 18 lives.

Prasad also slammed the BJP-led government at the Centre over the incident at New Delhi railway station, and demanded resignation of the railway minister.

"The stampede episode is very disturbing; it has exposed the inadequate arrangements made by the central government. The railway minister must resign after this incident... it's a complete failure of the Railways," he asserted.

At least 18 people were killed and more than a dozen injured in the stampede that broke out late Saturday night at the crowded railway station. Details were awaited on the exact number of people from Bihar who died in the stampede and the ones injured.

PHOTO: PTI

Asked to comment on how lakhs of people were heading to Prayagraj for the mega religious gathering, Pra-sad said, "The Kumbh has no meaning... It is just meaningless."

Reacting to the remarks, Bihar BJP spokesperson Manoj Sharma said it has exposed the RJD's mindset to-wards the Hindu religion.

"He is making such comments due to his politics of appeasement. The RJD leaders have always insulted the religious sentiments of Hindus.

The latest statement of Lalu Prasad calling the Maha Kumbh meaningless exposes the party's mindset towards the Hindu religion," Sharma claimed. *—PTI*

AHEAD OF CIVIC POLLS

M'rashtra alliances in turmoil as dynamics shift

MUMBAI, 16 FEB

Maharashtra's political landscape is undergoing significant upheaval, marked by unexpected camaraderie and growing tensions among various alliances. Following the BJP-led Mahayuti's decisive victory in the assembly polls, differences have surfaced within both the ruling coalition and the opposition Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA).

In recent months, senior leaders from Uddhav Thackeray's Shiv Sena (UBT) have engaged in multiple meetings with Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis, sparking speculation about potential shifts in alliances. Despite previously accusing Fadnavis of orchestrating a split in the Shiv Sena, parties seem to be exploring new partnerships, particularly ahead of upcoming civic polls in major cities such as Mumbai, Pune, and Thane.

Political analyst Abhay Deshpande noted that the interactions between these once-adversarial groups suggest they are "testing waters" and are more about posturing than actual alliances. Tensions are evident within the ruling Mahayuti, especially regarding the appointment of guardian ministers, which has led to dissatisfaction among Shiv Sena ministers.

MVA faces fractures, particularly with Uddhav Thackeray's faction expressing dissatisfaction over alliance dynamics and some leaders advocating for an independent path **PHOTO: PTI**

Meanwhile, the MVA faces fractures, particularly with Uddhav Thackeray's faction expressing dissatisfaction over alliance dynamics and some leaders advocating for an independent path. Recent criticisms of NCP chief Sharad Pawar by Shiv Sena leaders illustrate growing rifts within the MVA ranks, particularly after Pawar's public praise for Eknath Shinde. As the political climate remains fluid, all parties are bracing for high-stakes local body elections that could reshape Maharashtra's political alliances once again. *—PTI*

PHOTO: X

Veteran Telugu actress Krishnaveni dies at 102

HYDERABAD, 16 FEB

Veteran Telugu actress and producer C Krishnaveni died on Sunday. She was 102 years old. Krishnaveni passed away due to age-related issues, Movie Artistes Association Vice-President Madala Ravi told PTI. Born in West Godavari, Andhra Pradesh, Krishnaveni debuted as an actress in 'Kacha Devayani' in 1938 and went on to act in over 40 movies. In recognition of her contributions to the film industry, she was honored with the Raghupathi Venkaiah Award in 2004. Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu said on X: "The death of Krishnaveni saddens me. Her service to the art world by introducing NTR to the film industry with Mana Desam' is unforgettable. I express my deepest condolences to her family members." She is survived by her daughter. *—PTI*

Youtuber held for raping woman in Kerala

KOCHI, 16 FEB

A 25-year-old YouTuber has been arrested for allegedly raping a woman whom he had befriended through social media, police said. Based on the complaint of the victim, Kalamassery police arrested Mohammed Nishal from Kozhikode on Saturday, a police statement said. As per the complaint, the YouTuber had raped the woman twice after threatening to post her objectionable videos and photos on social media. Investigators said it is learnt that there are similar cases against the accused in various police stations. He also threatened to send those videos and photos to her husband as well, the complaint said. The Youtuber was produced before a local court which remanded him to judicial custody. *—PTI*

Fire in Mumbai building kills woman, 3 injured

MUMBAI, 16 FEB

A 42-year-old woman was killed and three other persons suffered from suffocation after a fire broke out in an 11-floor building in Mumbai on Sunday morning, a fire official said. The blaze erupted at 6.11am at Panna Ali Mansion building, in south Mumbai. Two women in the common passage of the first floor sustained injuries to their hands and legs and also got suffocated in the smoke. One of them, identified as Sabila Khatun Shaikh, died following the incident. A man on the building's sixth floor and a woman on the eighth floor also suffered from suffocation. They were rushed to the government hospital and their condition was reported to be stable. The cause of the fire was not yet known.*—PTI*

Porters carry bodies after Delhi stampede

Sources said delays in train departures, sale of 1,500 tickets every hour led to the stampede

Passengers board an overcrowded train for Prayagraj's Mahakumbh at the New Delhi railway station on Saturday; A railway platform littered with shoes, torn bags and clothes; A relative of Poonam Devi, a woman from Bihar's Chapra who died in New Delhi railway station stampede, mourns outside the mortuary at the LNJP Hospital ***PHOTOS: PTI***

NEW DELHI, 16 FEB

With the death toll in the overnight stampede at the New Delhi Railway Station climbing to 18 on Sunday, porters recounted their harrowing experience of carrying bodies on handcarts.

Krishna Kumar Jogi, a porter, said the crowd swelled when a train bound for Prayagraj arrived.

"A massive crowd gathered on the (footover) bridge. People were packed so tightly that many suffocated. Around 10-15 people lost their lives right there," he claimed.

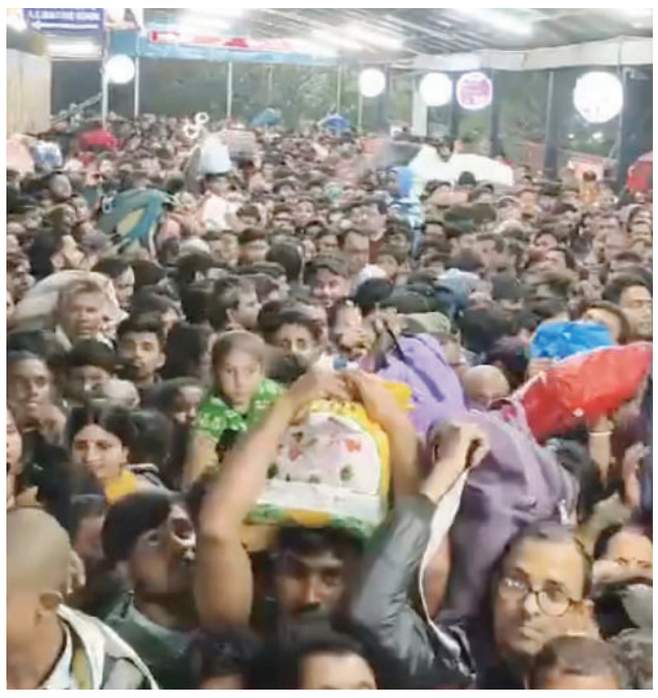
"We carried dead bodies from platform numbers 14 and 15 to the ambulance," he added.

Children and women were among those crushed in the crowd, struggling to breathe amid the suffocation, he said.

Balram, a porter, said, "We carried dead bodies on handcarts, the same ones we use for luggage. In my 15 years as a porter, I have never seen such a massive crowd."

Another porter described how there was a swell in crowd around 9.30 pm on Saturday when the Prayagraj-bound train was at the platform.

"People's shoes, slippers, and other belongings were scattered everywhere. We pulled out many children and elderly individuals from the chaos," he said.



An official said the incident occurred after some passengers slipped and fell on others while coming down from a footover bridge ***PHOTO: PTI***

Staff cleans up mess

Railway staff worked through the night to clear the platforms where large number of shoes, torn bags and clothes were strewn around after the stampede.

A railway staffer, who had spent hours clearing the personal belongings of passengers caught in the stampede, described the scene as "one of the worst" he had witnessed.

"There were belongings everywhere- -slippers , half-eaten food, and even a child's school bag. People had no time to pick up their things; they just ran for their lives," he said.

Officials said the stampede was triggered by an overwhelming number of passengers waiting to board trains for Prayagraj, where the Maha Kumbh is underway, from platform numbers 14 and 15.

Rs 10 lakh aid for victims

The death toll has risen to 18, with more than a dozen others injured.

The Railways has announced a compensation of Rs 10 lakh each for the next of kin of those killed in the stampede. Those seriously injured will get Rs 2.5 lakh and those with minor injuries 1 lakh, the Railways said.

Mega mismanagement

A senior railway official saying on Sunday that the incident occurred after some passengers slipped and fell on others while coming down from a footover bridge. While some sources said delays in train departures and the sale of 1,500 general tickets every hour may have created a chaotic situation, other sources indicated that wrong announcement about change of platforms may have created confusion that led to the stampede. Railways have announced the names of two high administrative group officials, who will be part of the inquiry committee constituted to probe the stampede. The stampede occurred around 9.55 pm on Saturday night when thousands of passengers, mostly Maha Kumbh pilgrims, crowded the station to board trains to Prayagraj.

The Prayagraj Express was stationed at platform 14, while the Swatantrata Senani Express and Bhubaneswar Rajdhani Express were delayed, causing an overwhelming surge of people on platforms 12, 13, and 14.

The situation worsened when a last-minute platform change was announced. Confused and panicked, passengers rushed towards platform 16, where an escalator became a deadly choke point, according to sources.

When the chaos subsided, 18 people including 11 women and five children, had lost their lives. *—PTI*

Major Stampedes in India

25 JAN, 2005: 340 were trampled to death in Maharashtra's Mandha rdevi temple after people fell down on the steps made slippery by breaking of coconuts.

30 SEPT, 2008: 250 killed in stampede after bomb threat triggered stamped in Chamunda Devi temple, Rajasthan.

13 OCT, 2013: 115 killed during Navratri festivities in MP after rumours of collapsing bridge caused stampede.

14 JAN, 2011: 104 Sabarimala devotees were killed when a jeep crashed into pilgrims in Kerala's Idukki.

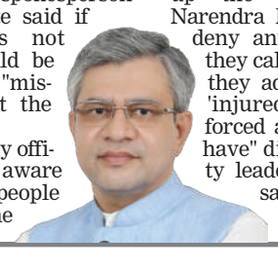
2 JULY, 2024: More than 100 people were killed after a stampede broke out at a 'satsang' organised by a self-styled godman, Bhole Baba in Hathras.

Oppn calls for Vaishnaw's resignation

NEW DELHI, 16 FEB

Opposition parties slammed the government over the loss of lives in the stampede and demanded that Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw must resign.

Congress accused the government of attempting to hide the truth about the deaths in the stampede and said it has once again highlighted the "failure" of the Railways and the "insensitivity" of the government. while the AAP said it was a glaring example of "gross mismanagement" and lack of crowd control measures. Congress spokesperson Supriya Shrinate said if Vaishnaw does not resign, he should be sacked for the "mismanagement" at the railway station.



She said railway officials were well aware of how many people were entering the station and as many as 1,500 tickets were being sold every hour. TMC leaders accused the Centre of trying to cover up the stampede. "First Narendra Modi and his BJP deny any stampede. Then they call it a rumour. Then they admit a 'few people' 'injured'. Then BJP is forced accept a 'few' "may have" died," TMC RS deputy leader Sagarika Ghose said in a post on X. *—PTI*

Maha Kumbh-bound traffic increases

REWA, 16 FEB

The number of vehicles heading towards Prayagraj for the Maha Kumbh has surged in the past 24 hours, prompting the local administration to remain on high alert. Approximately 1,000 vehicles per hour are crossing the Chakghat border into Uttar Pradesh, while 800 are returning in the same period, officials reported.

Prayagraj, situated 45 km from the Chakghat border, has seen an increase in traffic as the weekend draws more visitors to the event. The first parking facility for the Maha Kumbh is just 6 km from the border in Uttar Pradesh, with extensive arrangements made in the "holding areas" and help centres for the public.

The traffic flow on National Highway 30 has notably increased, though the situation is not yet a full-blown traffic jam. The administration has not imposed vehicle stoppages at key points such as Bela, Gangev, and Chakghat, but authorities remain on high alert. To manage the flow, holding areas have been set up in neighbouring districts like Maihar, Katni, and Satna. As the fair area and Prayagraj city have been declared a "no-vehicle zone," traffic congestion on the 250km stretch from Katni earlier this month has highlighted the challenges. *—PTI*

Pune: Neck belts, AI cams keep people safe from leopards

PUNE, 16 FEB

Forest officials in Pune's Junnar area have implemented a range of measures, including AI cameras and solar-powered electric fences, to protect residents from leopard attacks. The region has seen a troubling rise in human-wildlife conflicts, with nine fatalities reported in 2024 alone, prompting the district administration to designate 233 villages as "highly sensitive."

The Junnar forest division, characterised by its hilly terrain and dense agricultural plantations, provides an ideal habitat for leopards. Among the safety initiatives, solar-powered fencing has been installed around 150 homes, delivering a non-lethal shock that deters leopards. AI-equipped cameras at strategic locations alert officials through sirens when a leopard is detected. Additionally, specially designed neck belts have been distributed to farm workers for added protection. *—PTI*

The 'American dream' ends in shackles

CHANDIGARH, 16 FEB

Daljit Singh left his native village in Punjab for the US last year in a desperate bid to provide a better future for his family. On Saturday, he landed in Amritsar in a US military aircraft, his hands cuffed and legs chained.

Daljit said he was taken to the US through the 'donkey route' -- an illegal and risky pathway used by migrants to enter the US.

In 2022, Daljit was introduced to a travel agent by a man from his village, who promised to facilitate his entry into the US via legal channels for Rs 65 lakh. As part of the deal, Daljit handed over an advance agreement for one acre of his land.

However, after being sent to Brazil from Mumbai in August 2022, his journey quickly took a dark turn.

Daljit spent months traversing difficult terrains, including a month in Brazil and another country before navigating Panama on foot and by taxi. Parts of the journey were completed by ship, eventually reaching Mexico. The group of migrants, including Daljit, endured severe hardships, with food often limited to rice.

While in Mexico, the travel agent and the local contact allegedly pressured Daljit to transfer ownership of his land to them.

On 27 January, Daljit was forcibly pushed across the US border through Tijuana, where he was apprehended by US Border Patrol. He was held in a detention centre under harsh conditions, receiving minimal food and restricted movement.

Daljit's case is one of many, with 65 deportees from Punjab among the latest batch. The majority of deported migrants, aged between 18 and 30, were deceived by travel agents who promised legal entry but instead took them through dangerous, illegal routes. Many, like Daljit, found themselves arrested and sent back in shackles. *—PTI*

Ed Sheeran ends India Tour in Delhi, hopes to return

NEW DELHI, 16 FEB

British music star Ed Sheeran wrapped up his 'Mathematics Tour to India' with a captivating performance in Delhi-NCR, leaving an unforgettable mark on thousands of fans. The concert took place at Leisure Valley Ground, with Indian singer Lisa Mishra opening the show, energising the crowd for Sheeran's arrival.

Dressed in a T-shirt emblazoned with 'Delhi', Sheeran opened the concert with 'Castle on the Hill' and quickly engaged with the audience. He expressed his excitement at performing in various Indian cities, having previously only played in Mumbai. Reflecting on his visit, he praised the charm of Old Delhi, sharing that he had filmed videos during his exploration of the city.

Over the next two hours, Sheeran performed a string of hits, including 'Thinking Out Loud' and 'Perfect'. He paused during 'Happier' to assist a fan who fainted, showing his care for the audience. Closing the night with 'Shape of You' and 'Bad Habits', he stated, "The last three weeks in India have been magical. Thank you for welcoming me and hopefully, I'll be back soon." *—PTI*

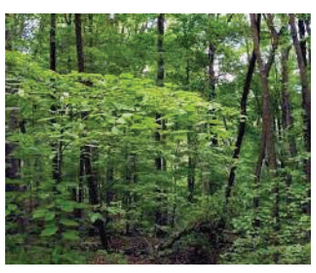
IN A DECADE

India's green cover absorbs more carbon than it emits: Study

MUMBAI, 16 FEB

A recent study by the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research (IISER) in Bhopal reveals that India's green cover has absorbed more carbon than it has emitted annually over the past decade. However, the research highlights a decline in carbon sequestration rates during extreme climate events, such as droughts.

Dhanyalekshmi Pillai, associate professor at IISER Bhopal, explained that the net ecosystem exchange (NEE) indicates the overall balance between carbon uptake and release, with negative values demonstrating effective carbon storage. Over the last ten



years, India's ecosystems have sequestered between 380 and 530 million tonnes of carbon annually.

The study showcases the varying efficiency of different vegetation types in carbon absorption. While evergreen forests excel at capturing CO2, deciduous forests in central India released 210 million tonnes of carbon annually due to higher respiration rates. Although croplands are less effective per unit area, their extensive presence contributes significantly to overall CO2 removal.

Pillai cautioned that the sequestration potential of green cover isn't limitless and diminishes under climate extremes, urging the need for effective climate policies and ecosystem management. Leveraging advanced observational technologies and satellite data, the IISER team has made strides in quantifying India's carbon sequestration capabilities, underscoring the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration in tackling climate challenges. *—PTI*

Senior's workplace admonition not crime: SC

NEW DELHI, 16 FEB

PHOTO: PTI

The Supreme Court of India has ruled that reprimands issued by senior employees at the workplace do not constitute an "intentional insult" warranting criminal charges. This decision emphasises the need to maintain a conducive disciplinary environment in professional settings.

A bench comprising Justices Sanjay Karol and Sandeep Mehta clarified that mere instances of abuse, discourtesy, or rudeness cannot be classified as intentional insults under Section 504 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), which concerns provocation leading to a breach of peace. This provision, now replaced by Section 352 in the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita effective from July 2024, carries a potential prison term of up to two years.

The judgement arose from a 2022 case involving an officiating director at the National Institute for Empowerment of Persons with Intellectual Disabilities, accused of reprimanding an assistant professor for lodging complaints against him. The court found the allegations to be speculative and insufficient to support charges of negligence under Sections 269 and 270 of the IPC, which pertain to the spread of infectious diseases. The bench deemed that a senior's admonition is acceptable. *—PTI*

'DON'T KILL THE DEAL'

Protesters demand the immediate release of hostages held by Hamas in the Gaza Strip, in Tel Aviv, Israel. ***PHOTO: PTI***

Deportees' American dream crash-lands in Amritsar

They had dreamt of settling in the US for a better life but they came back in 'shackles', staring at a bleak future.

Many of the deportees, who were in the US military aircraft that landed at the Amritsar airport on Saturday carrying 116 illegal Indian immigrants, said their family arranged large sums of money by either selling or mortgaging their farm land or by borrowing from their relatives, only to send them to the US.

Among the fresh batch of deportees, 65 were from Punjab, 33 from Haryana, eight from Gujarat, two each from Uttar Pradesh, Goa, Maharashtra and Rajasthan, and one each from Himachal Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir.

Sourav, 20, who reached his village Chandiwala in Punjab's Ferozepur district on Sunday, said he was caught by the US authorities as tried to enter the country by crossing the border on 27 January. He left home for the US on 17 December last year.

"We were kept in a camp (detention centre) for 18 days," Sourav said, adding that their mobile phones were taken away.

"A day before yesterday, we were told that we will be shifted to another camp. When we were put into a plane, they said we are being taken to India," Sourav said.

Stating that his family spent Rs 45-46 lakh to send him to abroad, Sourav said, "Two acres of farm land were sold and money was borrowed from a commission agent."

He said he was taken to US border via Amsterdam, Panama, and Mexico. On whether they were shackled en route to Amritsar, Sourav said, "We were handcuffed and our legs were chained."

Harjit Singh, who hails from Khanowal Ghuman village in Gurdaspur district, was deported from the US along with his cousin.

"We reached home at around 6 am today," he said.

"We were caught while crossing the US border on 27 January and kept at a detention centre for 18 days. We were deported on 13 February, handcuffed with our legs chained," he said.

Harjit said his family spent Rs 90 lakh on him and his cousin for them to go to the US.

"We were assured that we will be taken to America legally, but we were not," Harjit said. Mantaj Singh, 22, a resident of Bodal village in Hoshiarpur district, said he was caught by the US Border Patrol as soon as he tried to enter the US, adding that he was taken there via 'donkey route' -- an illegal and risky pathway used by migrants to enter the US. The parents of Sahil Preet Singh, a resident of Behbal Bahadur village in Kapurthala district, said they spent Rs 40-45 lakh for sending their son abroad.

Claiming that a travel agent duped them, Sahil's mother Harvinder Kaur said the family arranged the money by selling agricultural land and gold ornaments, and by borrowing from their relatives. She also demanded the Punjab government to give a job to his son and file a criminal case against the fraudulent agent.

Jaswinder Singh from Dharamkot village in Moga district left home for the US nearly 45 days ago. A sarpanch from his village said the family sold one-and-a-half acres of land, raised Rs 45 lakh, gave it to a travel agent who in turn duped them.

Many from the first batch of illegal immigrants who landed in Amritsar on 5 February, most of them from Punjab, had also said they wanted to migrate to the US for a better life for their families but were duped by their agents. *—PTI*

Indians deported from the US being escorted by the police as they leave the airport upon their arrival, in Amritsar on early Sunday morning ***PHOTO: PTI***

- Jaswinder Singh from Dharamkot village in Moga district left home for the US nearly 45 days ago. A sarpanch from his village said the family sold one-and-a-half acres of land, raised Rs 45 lakh, gave it to a travel agent who in turn duped them

LETTERS write to us at salarenglishdigital@gmail.com

SALAR

A year on, Russian Oppn struggles without Navalny

The stunning news came in a terse statement from the Russian penitentiary service a year ago: Opposition leader Alexei Navalny had died in the Arctic Circle penal colony where he was serving a prison sentence.

In the year since the death of Navalny at age 47, the Russian opposition has struggled to find its footing against President Vladimir Putin.

Outlawed at home and operating from exile abroad without Putin's fiercest foe, it has failed to form a united front and a clear plan of action against the Kremlin. Instead, rival groups have traded accusations that some see as efforts to discredit each other and vie for influence. Navalny's death was "a point of no return" and left an impossible void to fill, said Oleg Ivanov, a supporter who left Russia after it invaded Ukraine in 2022 and lives in Los Angeles.

"Alexei was the only hope that Russia has, at least potentially and hypothetically, some kind of a meaningful leader who could unite all the people willing to change something in our country, in our lives," Ivanov said. Navalny is the second opposition leader whose sudden death shocked Russia and the world. In February 2015, prominent politician Boris Nemtsov was gunned down on a bridge near the Kremlin just days before he, Navalny and others were expected to lead a mass anti-Putin rally.

Meanwhile, millions viewed his anti-corruption videos

Navalny's vision of a "beautiful Russia of the future," where leaders are freely and fairly elected, corruption is tamed, and democratic institutions work, earned him widespread support in the vast country.

His charisma and sardonic humour drew young, energetic activists to his side — a team that resembled "a fancy startup" rather than a clandestine revolutionary operation, according to his memoir, "Patriot," released eight months after his death.

As Navalny aspired to public office, authorities responded by bringing multiple criminal charges against him, his allies and even relatives. Regularly jailed, he was physically attacked by Kremlin supporters, one of whom threw green dye in his face that nearly cost him the vision in one eye.

He finished second in the race for Moscow mayor in 2013 amid allegations of vote rigging. In 2017, he announced plans to run for president and set up a sprawling network of regional offices across the country, recruiting local activists. When he was eventually barred from running, he kept those offices open, extending his reach across Russia's 11 time zones.

In 2020, Navalny was poisoned with a nerve agent attack he blamed on the Kremlin, which always denied involvement. His family and allies fought to have him flown to Germany for treatment and recovery. Five months later, he returned to Russia, where he was immediately arrested and imprisoned for the last three years of his life.

But even behind bars, in incredibly harsh conditions of constant pressure and surveillance, Navalny found a way to relay messages. His popular social media accounts were regularly updated with sarcastic vignettes about prison life and political statements.

Authorities blamed Navalny's death, announced 16 February 2024, on natural causes — a sudden spike in blood pressure and chronic diseases. His family and allies reject that and insist he was killed on orders from the Kremlin — accusations its officials deny.

Tens of thousands of people attended his funeral in Moscow on 1 March in a rare show of defiance in a country where any street rally or even single pickets often result in immediate arrest. For days afterward, people brought flowers to his grave.

Longtime ally Vladimir Ashurkov described Navalny as "a political figure that basically defined the generation of Russians over the last 15 years."

His widow, Yulia Navalnaya, has vowed to continue his fight. She has recorded regular video addresses to her supporters and has met Western leaders and top officials, advocating for Russians who oppose Putin and his war in Ukraine. Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation continues to expose corruption in Russia in colorful videos and organises occasional protests abroad, condemning Putin and the war in Ukraine.

Ashurkov describes the situation in Russia and Ukraine now as "dark times" and "difficult times."

But he notes that Navalny went through many difficulties and pressure in his life.

"His advice and his motivation to all of us has been, Don't sit still. Try to do something to change the situation, and be prepared for change'," he said. *—PTI*

Alexei Navalny is the second opposition leader in Russia whose sudden death shocked Russia and the world ***PHOTO: X***

Didi Ki Rasoi: Empowering Bihar's women, one meal at a time

In the crowded corridors of Patna Medical College and Hospital (PMCH), Poonam Devi, 40, moves with purpose.

Each day, she travels several kms from her village near Patna to work in the hospital canteen. But it is not any other canteen, she has its ownership.

"I used to work in my fields and earn nothing, but now I bring home money. My husband and in-laws were not happy with my decision to be part of a self-help group and go out of the house but once they saw the inflow of money, things changed," she said, adding that now she earns more than her husband and enjoys an autonomy which she didn't think was possible before.

Poonam is among the 3,952 women involved with 'Didi Ki Rasoi' (DKR), an initiative which began as a modest canteen in Bihar's Vaishali in 2018 but has now expanded into a network of 216 canteens throughout the state, with the aim to provide hygienic food at places like hospitals, government offices, and other institutions.

These canteens are run entirely by rural women who are part of self-help groups (SHGs) in Bihar. The DKR initiative is now actively running across Bihar, covering 36 district hospitals, 49 sub-division hospitals, 10 medical colleges and hospitals, 30 government offices and 91 SC/ST residential schools. It has generated a total business of Rs 119 crore till now. Vimal Kumar, the block development manager for Didi Ki Rasoi in Patna, explained its distinctive model.

"Here, all didis are the owners and this sense of ownership really helps as it becomes not just a job for people here but a partnership. Not just that, the canteens have also helped curb corruption which was earlier seen in contractor-run canteens," he said.

The Covid-19 pandemic proved to be a testing time for these women when they continued to deliver food to hospitals and quarantine centres to ensure that patients and frontline workers had access to quality meals.

"It was a difficult time but it was also a time we knew we were needed the most. The food had to be of good quality and nutritious that could help patients fight the disease, so we continued to work," Kanchan Devi, one of the cooks at a canteen in Vaishali, said.

For many, Didi Ki Rasoi has opened doors to not just financial independence but also self-respect. Like Rekha Kumari, 22, who works as a cashier at a canteen in Muzaffarpur's Sadar hospital.

Even though her family's financial struggles forced her to leave school after Class 12 and marry young, she was committed to find a way to study and find work.

"I had to revolt against my family to join Didi Ki Rasoi so much so that my husband used to follow me to work because he was suspicious. But once I started bringing home money, they all had to accept my job," she said.

Now, Rekha is saving money to continue her education and pursue her dream to become a chartered accountant.

Parvati Kumari, a cook at the Sardar Patel Bhawan canteen, shared similar struggles. Married at 14, she had to drop out of school. But after two decades, she has finally managed to earn independence through her job.

"I earn Rs 10,000 every month. My husband is a driver, and together we make Rs 40,000. Now my next focus is my children's education. I tell them that 'you can be anything you want. I will make sure of that'," she said. Shobha Devi, a woman involved with the initiative, said, "With inflation, we are still struggling to make ends meet. Now we want to grow our business by further expanding and supplying food at more stations, like we started very recently, supplying food to night shelters."

The initiative has also broadened its services to include roles such as safai karamcharis (sanitation workers), cloth stitching of patients, laundry services, and even helpdesks in hospitals to assist patients and visitors.

Despite challenges like inflation and plans for further expansion, these women remain determined to grow their enterprise and inspire others.

"The respect we did not get at home we get here. Even if we are unwell or the weather is adverse, we still come here because the appreciation we have yearned for all our life we get here," Poonam said. Her words were echoed by nearly all the women at the collectives – a movement which they said has empowered them, one meal at a time. And as Poonam aptly put it, "This is just the beginning." *—PTI*

Members of the Didi ki Rasoi self help group take care of the canteen at the Patna Medical College and Hospital in Patna ***PHOTO: PTI***

Taiwan spots 24 Chinese aircraft near its territory

TAIPEI, 16 FEB

Taiwan's Ministry of National Defence reported the detection of 24 People's Liberation Army aircraft, including J-10s and KJ-500s, on Sunday. Of these, 18 cross the median line of the Taiwan Strait, entering the northern, central, and southwestern Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ). The previous day, 19 PLA aircraft and eight naval vessels were noted, with 15 aircraft crossing into Taiwan's ADIZ. This escalation follows two US ships' transit through the Strait, prompting Beijing to reaffirm Taiwan's status as a part of China. The Taiwan-China tension is a major geopolitical issue, with Taiwan operating as an independent state. *—ANI*

Argentina Prez draws flak over 'crypto push'

BUENOS AIRES, 16 FEB

Argentina's President Javier Milei faced criticism and threats of impeachment on Saturday after he made a post on social media, promoting a cryptocurrency that quickly tanked in value. Milei promoted a new cryptocurrency on X, which increased in value to USD 5 before quickly tanking to below USD 1. "The world wants to invest in Argentina. $LIBRA," the post reportedly said. Argentina's fintech chamber acknowledged that the case could potentially be a "rug pull" – a scheme where a cryptocurrency's creators quickly generate real investment to pump up the value before dumping their own stake. "This scandal, which embarrasses us on an international scale, requires us to launch an impeachment request against the president," said opposition lawmaker Leandro Santoro. *—DW NEWS*

Doctors order 'absolute rest' for Pope Francis

ROME, 16 FEB

Doctors on Saturday prescribed an "absolute rest" for Pope Francis and modified the treatment for his respiratory tract infection, the Vatican said. The 88-year-old was admitted to a hospital a day ago, following a weeklong bout of bronchitis. On the doctors' orders, the pope will not deliver his traditional Sunday noon blessing, which he could have done from his hospital room if he was well enough. The Argentine pope, a known workaholic who keeps up a gruelling pace despite his many ailments, was admitted to Rome's Gemelli hospital on Friday after his bronchitis worsened. It was his fourth hospitalisation since his 2013 election and raised questions about his increasingly precarious health. Preliminary tests showed that he had a respiratory tract infection. *—PTI*

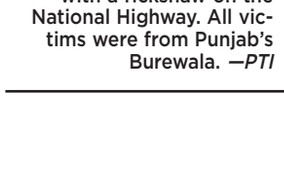


PHOTO: X

Road accidents kill 16 in Pak's Sindh province

ISLAMABAD, 16 FEB

Sixteen people were killed and 45 others injured in two separate road accidents in Pakistan's Sindh province, according to police. In the first accident, five people were killed and 10 injured when the van they were travelling in collided with a trailer near Qazi Ahmed town of Sindh's Shaheed Benazirabad District on Saturday. Qazi Ahmed Station House Officer Waseem Mirza said the van was heading to Lal Shahbaz Qalandar's shrine in Jamshoro District's Sehwan city. In the second accident, 11 people were killed and 35 injured in a road accident near Ranipur, Khairpur district in the province. The accident occurred when a bus from Burewala collided with a rickshaw on the National Highway. All victims were from Punjab's Burewala. *—PTI*

Zelenskyy rejects US deal to access rare minerals

Ukrainian Prez says document 'too focused on US interests'

MUNICH, 16 FEB

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has directed his ministers not to sign a proposed agreement to give the United States access to Ukraine's rare earth minerals because the document was too focused on US interests.

The proposal, which was at the centre of Zelenskyy's talks with US Vice President JD Vance on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference on Friday, did not offer any specific security guarantees in return, according to one current and one former senior officials familiar with the talks.

Zelenskyy's decision to reject a deal, at least for now, was described as "short-sighted" by a senior White House official.

"I didn't let the ministers sign a relevant agreement because in my view it is not ready to protect us, our interest," Zelenskyy said on Saturday in Munich.

Zelenskyy's decision to reject a deal was described as "short-sighted" by a senior White House official **PHOTO: PTI**

The proposal focused on how the US could use Kyiv's rare earth minerals "as compensation" for support already given to Ukraine by the Biden administration and as payment for future aid, the two officials said.

"For me, it is very important the connection between some kind of security guarantees and some kind of investment," the Ukrainian president said.

Zelenskyy did not go into details about why he instructed his officials not to sign the document. "It's a colonial agreement and Zelenskyy cannot sign it," the former senior official said.

Ukraine has vast reserves of critical minerals which are used in aerospace, defence and nuclear industries. The Trump administration has indicated it is interested in accessing them to reduce dependence on China but Zelenskyy said any exploitation would need to be tied to security guarantees for Ukraine that would deter future Russian aggression.

"For me is very important the connection between some kind of security guarantees and some kind of investment," the Ukrainian president said.

Zelenskyy did not go into details about why he instructed his officials not to sign the document which was given to Ukrainian officials on Wednesday by US Treasury Secretary Scott Bassent on a visit to Kyiv. *—PTI*

Nepal govt to table five ordinances

KATHMANDU, 16 FEB

A meeting of the ruling parties of Nepal on Tuesday reached a consensus to endorse five ordinances in the Upper House of the Parliament, dropping a disputed on related to land.

Members of the ruling alliance met at the Prime Minister's official residence in Baluwatar on Saturday and agreed to advance five of the six ordinances in Parliament, according to official sources.

The ordinance related to land was put on hold following strong objections from some members. "Five ordinances will be tabled in the National Assembly on Tuesday," Home Minister Ramesh Lekhak said.

The Janata Samajwadi Party Nepal and Lokatantrik Samajwadi Party had raised serious objections to some of the provisions in the land-related ordinance. The ordinance aims to update and streamline legal provisions in various land-related laws, The Kathmandu Post newspaper reported in January when it was brought in by the government.

An ordinance related to land was put on hold following strong objections from some members **PHOTO: PTI**

It said that while the specific details of the amendments have yet to be publicly disclosed, "government sources indicate that the ordinance includes significant reforms to land policies, particularly those affecting landless individuals and marginalised communities." *—PTI*

Nigeria slams Canada for visa refusal to Musa

ABUJA, 16 FEB

Nigeria has criticised Canada for refusing visas to senior military officers, including Chief of Defence Staff Gen Christopher Musa. Half of his delegation was denied entry for an official assignment on Wednesday.

Interior Minister Olubunmi Tunji-Ojo called the move "disrespectful," while National Security Adviser Nuhu Ribadu said Canada "can go to hell."

The Canadian High Commission cited privacy reasons for not disclosing details. The incident follows Canada's recent visa policy changes aimed at border security. Nigeria has vowed to address the issue diplomatically. *—Agencies*

42 die in Mali mine collapse, 2nd in a month

BAMKO, 16 FEB

A gold mine collapsed in eastern Mali, killing dozens of people and injuring many more. The prefect of Kenieba, who represents the government in the locality, said the death toll was 42.

"It was a landslide at a site run by Chinese nationals," said community leader Falaye Sissoko, adding that authorities were probing whether the mine was operating legally.

It is the second major accident in less than a month in the French-speaking West African country, which is one of Africa's top three gold producers. On 29 January, a landslide killed several gold miners, mostly women, in the Koulikoro region in the south of the country.

"Gold is by far Mali's most important export, comprising more than 80 per cent of total exports in 2021," according to the International Trade Administration of the US Department of Commerce. It says more than 2 million people, or more than 10 per cent of Mali's population, depend on the mining sector for income.

Artisanal gold mining is estimated to produce around 30 tonnes of gold a year. *—PTI*

Austria stabbing linked to IS group

VIENNA, 16 FEB

A 23-year-old Syrian man believed to have connections with the Islamic State group was arrested after a stabbing attack in Villach that left a 14-year-old boy dead and five others injured. Interior Minister Gerhard Karner described the attack as an "Islamist incident" with indications that the perpetrator radicalised rapidly online.

PHOTO: X

The assailant struck passers-by using a folding knife, with two of the injured in serious condition. Police found Islamic State flags in the suspect's apartment, although no weapons or hazardous items were discovered. Authorities are currently investigating potential accomplices, but the prevailing thought is that he acted alone.

After the attack, local officials cancelled a planned carnival procession, and an increased police presence is expected in Villach. *—PTI*

GERMAN CITY OFFERS BEER FOR VOTES

BERLIN, 16 FEB

Free beer or non-alcoholic drinks were offered to early voters in the western German city of Duisburg that has shown low turnout in the past.

The city of Duisburg in western Germany has come up with an unorthodox way to lure reluctant voters to the polling station.

Voters who cast absentee ballots in the city centre by 2 pm local time on Saturday were given a voucher for a drink to spend at a beer cart next to the polling station.

The voucher could also be used for a non-alcoholic drink. A local brewery is supporting the unusual project, Duisburg officials said.

According to a reporter with the German dpa news agency at the scene, about 80 voters had turned up within the first hour to take advantage of the offer. *—DW News*

FLEXING MUSCLE

US recently threatened Panama with retaliation if it did not immediately reduce Chinese influence over the canal **PHOTO: Wikipedia**

Call in US to curb Chinese influence on Panama Canal

WASHINGTON, 16 FEB

Chinese and Hong Kong businesses' control of important infrastructure on the Panama Canal and other port facilities in the Western Hemisphere has prompted Washington to take measures to lessen Beijing's influence, said a report by Radio Free Asia (RFA).

Beijing has "a strategic position over one of the world's most important waterways," warned Chairman Carlos Jimenez of the US House of Representatives Homeland Security Subcommittee on Transportation and Maritime Security, referring to the Panama Canal, during a recent hearing.

Jimenez said this allows the Chinese Communist Party "to exert influence over commercial shipping, gather intelligence on American and Allied vessel traffic and potentially restrict the mobility of our Navy in a time of crisis", the RFA reported.

Experts told the panel that China owns or operates over half of the major container ports outside of China as cited by the RFA.

The RFA report said US Secretary of State Marco Rubio recently threatened Panamanian leader Jose Raul Mulino with possible American retaliation if his country does not immediately reduce Chinese influence over the canal. *—PTI*

Rubio on Mideast trip in Israel

Secretary of State Marco Rubio is kicking off a Mideast tour in Israel on Sunday, as Arab leaders reel from President Donald Trump's proposal to transfer the Palestinian population of the Gaza Strip to other countries and redevelop it under US ownership. On Rubio's first visit to the region as America's top diplomat, he is likely to get a warm welcome from PM Benjamin Netanyahu. *—PTI*

Musk-led DOGE cancels $29M funding to Bangladesh

WASHINGTON, 16 FEB

The Elon Musk-led Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) under the Donald Trump administration has announced that it is saving US taxpayers' money by cancelling a slew of projects abroad, including one in Bangladesh.

The DOGE on Saturday posted on X that it was cancelling a USD 29M funding for "strengthening the political landscape in Bangladesh".

Meanwhile, Bangladesh's Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus on Friday said he has discussed with Musk a collaboration to launch Starlink satellite internet service in Bangladesh.

Yunus also extended an invitation to Elon Musk to visit Bangladesh for the potential launch of Starlink services, underscoring the significance of this initiative for national development. "I look forward to it," Musk said. *—PTI*

Floods hit Kentucky, West Virginia

WASHINGTON, 16 FEB

Heavy rains and dangerous flooding struck the Southeast US as much of the East endured a harsh, soggy weather on Saturday, with at least one fatality reported in Kentucky. A man was found dead in floodwaters in Clay County, Kentucky, WKYT-TV reported.

Kentucky Gov Andy Beshear preemptively declared a state of emergency in Kentucky, where flash flooding was expected into Sunday. Flash flooding hit some roads in Bowling Green and parts of western Kentucky could face up to 8 inches of rain.

West Virginia Gov Patrick Morrisey declared emergency in 10 southern counties on Saturday night due to heavy rains and flooding, allowing the state to use its resources to help local authorities.

Forecasters also predicted weekend snowstorms in the Northeast and tornadoes in the Mississippi Valley. *—PTI*

RISING AGAINST CORRUPTION

Stir, blockade mark Serbia's Statehood Day

KRAGUJEVAC, 16 FEB

Student-led protesters staged a blockade in the city of Kragujevac in Serbia, demanding that officials publish documents on a deadly roof canopy collapse. President Alexander Vucic held a rally that warned against "separatist ideas". Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic also held a rally in an effort to shore up his support, with both events coinciding with Serbia's Statehood Day.

Thousands took to the streets of the central Serbian city of Kragujevac on Saturday, months after the deadly collapse of a train station canopy sparked a wave of student-led protests.

On Saturday, protesters in Kragujevac observed 15 minutes of silence at 11.52am local time, marking the moment of the deadly roof collapse.

It is the third day-long blockade in the country, after similar rallies in Novi Sad and in the capital, Belgrade.

The protest coincides with Serbian Statehood Day, which commemorates the 1804 first Serbian uprising, as well as the declaration of an 1835 Constitution that sought to limit the powers of rulers at a time when Serbia was an autonomous principality within the Ottoman Empire. The constitution was later repealed. The movement has triggered protests in almost every municipality, and students have been joined by teachers, lawyers, medical professionals, workers in the IT sector and others.

Thousands took to the streets of Kragujevac on Saturday and observed 15 minutes of silence at 11.52am local time, marking the moment of the deadly collapse of a train station canopy **PHOTO: OGNJENZORIC**

Students allege that the incident was caused by corruption in the government. The protest movement led to the resignation of Prime Minister Milos Vucevic and Novi Sad mayor Milan Duric last month. *—Agencies*

PHOTO: PTI

Bank of M'rashtra gets RBI nod for GIFT City branch

MUMBAI, 16 FEB

State-owned Bank of Maharashtra (BoM) on Sunday said it has received approval from the Reserve Bank of India to set up an International Financial Services Centre (IFSC) Banking Unit at GIFT City. The branch will function as Bank of Maharashtra's first international branch carrying out offshore banking operations from India. Aligned with the government's vision of making India an international financial hub, the GIFT City, located in Gandhinagar, Gujarat is India's first IFSC, aimed at revolutionizing India's financial ecosystem by providing world-class banking services locally and reducing reliance on offshore financial hubs, BoM said in a statement. The centre has also become a hub for fintech innovation and global investments, generating jobs. *—PTI*

Mother Dairy turnover to cross Rs 17K cr in FY25

NEW DELHI, 16 FEB

Mother Dairy is likely to achieve 15 per cent growth in turnover this fiscal to more than Rs 17,000 crore on strong demand for its food products and expansion of production capacity as well as distribution network. Besides fresh milk and other dairy products, Mother Dairy sells edible oils under 'Dhara' brand and horticulture (fresh and frozen fruits & vegetables) items under 'Safal' brand. It is the leading milk supplier in Delhi-NCR. In an interview with PTI, Mother Dairy Managing Director Manish Bandlish noted that fiscal year 2024-25 marks a momentous milestone for the company as it completed 50th year of inception. In 2023-24, Mother Dairy had achieved a turnover of Rs 15,037 crore. *—PTI*

Hero MotoCorp eyes double-digit revenue growth

NEW DELHI, 16 FEB

The country's largest two-wheeler maker Hero MotoCorp expects double-digit revenue growth next fiscal riding on the back of continued investments on new products and segments, according to Chief Financial Officer Vivek Anand. The company, which reported a revenue of Rs 10,260 crore for the December quarter, also anticipates a double-digit revenue growth in the current fiscal. The company's consolidated revenue from operations for FY24 stood at Rs 37,789 crore as compared with Rs 34,158 crore in FY23. The company is upgrading some of its existing sales outlets under Hero 2.0 theme. It is also setting up premium showrooms under Premia brand. *—PTI*

Looking to expand mfg footprint in US: Welspun MD

NEW DELHI, 16 FEB

Home textiles major Welspun Living Ltd is looking to expand its manufacturing footprint in the US with an eye on being closer to customers of its largest market, according to Managing Director and CEO Dipali Goenka. Despite US President Donald Trump's tariff threats, the company is optimistic that even if it were to be imposed it will come in a very mutual manner considering India's global standing, but Welspun Living is preparing to thrive in uncertain times, Goenka told. The company has invested USD 12.5 million on the pillow unit in Ohio, which is a fully automated unit. On the company's preparedness in case the tariffs are imposed, she said before and after Covid-19 the world has not been same and the company has learnt to function in uncertain times. *—PTI*

Mcap of 8 firms tumbles ₹2L cr; RIL biggest laggard

RIL, HDFC & ITC faced combined erosion of 2,03,952.65 cr

NEW DELHI, 16 FEB

The combined market valuation of eight of the 10 most valued domestic firms eroded by Rs 2 lakh crore last week, with Reliance Industries taking the biggest hit in line with a bearish trend in the broader stock market.

Equity benchmark indices Sensex and Nifty extended their downward trend to the eighth day in a row on Friday.

In the past eight trading days, the BSE benchmark has tumbled 2,644.6 points or 3.36 per cent, and the Nifty slumped 810 points or 3.41 per cent.

While Reliance Industries, Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), HDFC Bank, Infosys, State Bank of India, Hindustan Unilever, Bajaj Finance and ITC faced a combined erosion of Rs 2,03,952.65 crore in their valuation, Bharti Airtel and ICICI Bank emerged as the gainers.

Equity benchmark indices Sensex and Nifty extended their downward trend to the eighth day in a row on Friday *PHOTO*: PIXABAY

The market capitalisation (mcap) of Reliance Industries tanked Rs 67,526.54 crore to Rs 16,46,822.12 crore. The valuation of TCS tumbled Rs 34,950.72 crore to Rs 14,22,903.37 crore.

HDFC Bank's mcap eroded by Rs 28,382.23 crore to Rs 12,96,708.35 crore and that of ITC plunged Rs 25,429.75 crore to Rs 5,13,699.85 crore.

The mcap of Infosys dropped Rs 19,287.32 crore to Rs 7,70,786.76 crore and that of State Bank of India declined Rs 13,431.55 crore to Rs 6,44,357.57 crore.

The market valuation of Hindustan Unilever diminished by Rs 10,714.14 crore to Rs 5,44,647 crore and that of Bajaj Finance dipped Rs 4,230.4 crore to Rs 5,20,082.42 crore.

However, the mcap of Bharti Airtel jumped Rs 22,426.2 crore to Rs 9,78,631.54 crore and that of ICICI Bank climbed Rs 1,182.57 crore to Rs 8,88,815.13 crore.

In the top-10 chart, Reliance Industries retained the title of the most valued firm followed by TCS, HDFC Bank, Bharti Airtel, ICICI Bank, Infosys, State Bank of India, Hindustan Unilever, Bajaj Finance and ITC. *—PTI*

AMID 8 DAYS OF MKT LOSS

Global trends, FIIs to drive mkt trends this week

NEW DELHI, 16 FEB

Stock markets are expected to be driven by global trends and FPI trading activity this week after the conclusion of the earnings season, analysts said.

Unabated foreign fund outflows, lower-than-expected quarterly earnings and global trade war fears hit market sentiments last week, where the benchmark indices Sensex and Nifty extended their downward trend to the eighth day in a row on Friday.

"With the conclusion of the Q3 earnings season, now focus will be on global developments amid a turbulent market environment on account of Donald Trump's trade policies," Siddhartha Khemka, Head - Research, Wealth Management, Motilal Oswal Financial Services Ltd, said.

PHOTO: PTI

Moreover, the rupee-dollar trend and movement of Brent crude, the global oil benchmark, will also be tracked by investors.

The US FOMC (Federal Open Market Committee) meeting minutes will also be in focus.

In the last eight trading days, the BSE benchmark tanked 2,644.6 points or 3.36 per cent, and the NSE Nifty slumped 810 points or 3.41 per cent. *—PTI*

India-US TRUST initiative to enhance economic ties

NEW DELHI, 16 FEB

The India-US TRUST (Transforming Relationship Utilising Strategic Technology) initiative is set to strengthen economic and technological cooperation between the two nations, with a specific focus on the IMEC (India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor) framework aimed at advancing infrastructure collaboration.

Following discussions between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and US President Donald Trump in Washington, the two leaders agreed to prioritise the establishment of resilient supply chains for critical minerals, advanced materials, and pharmaceuticals. A joint statement highlighted a new initiative for the recovery and processing of strategic minerals, including lithium and rare earth elements.

Industry experts have praised the TRUST initiative as a pivotal step in securing India's industrial future. Naveen Jindal, President of the Indian Steel Association, stated that the emphasis on these supply chains significantly enhances economic and technological partnerships. Rajamani Krishnamurti, President of the Indian Stainless Steel Development Association, emphasised its importance for sectors like stainless steel and clean energy.

PHOTO: PTI

I think, it gives a lot of confidence and a lot of relief to every business person in the US and in India who believe that together, we can truly transform world trade, we can truly work as two friends

-Piyush Goyal, Commerce Minister

Indrajit Mookerjee from Texmaco Rail & Engineering noted the potential for growth in manufacturing and processing technologies linked to the green energy transition. However, experts like Gaurav Moda from EY-Parthenon cautioned about challenges such as resource distribution and environmental concerns.

Overall, the collaboration between India and the US marks a significant milestone in securing a stable supply of essential materials for critical industries. *—PTI*

CASTOR OIL EXPORTS SET FOR $2.5B SURGE

NEW DELHI, 16 FEB

Indian castor oil exports are on the rise, with the Sustainable Castor Association (SCA) advocating for sustainable farming practices to help reach USD 2.5 billion in shipments by 2030. SCA Director Abhay Udeshi highlighted the adoption of the "SuCCESS Code", a framework designed to enhance sustainability and restore soil health among farmers.

India, the largest global producer and exporter of castor oil, had exports valued at approximately USD 715 million between April and December of the current fiscal year, down from USD 1 billion in 2023-24. The major growing regions are Gujarat and Rajasthan, with key export markets including China, Germany, and Japan.

Udeshi noted that compliance with rising European Union standards is crucial for expanding exports. He emphasised the benefits of SuCESS-certified farms, which have seen increased yields and reduced costs, presenting a win-win scenario for farmers and global customers alike. *—PTI*

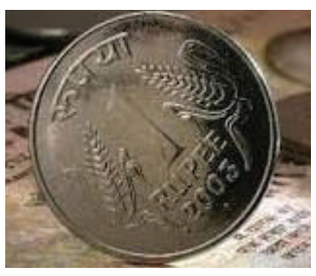
'Depreciating rupee poses risks to inflation'

NEW DELHI, 16 FEB

A report by financial services firm Centrum Broking has highlighted that the depreciating Indian rupee could pose a significant downside risk to overall inflation in the country, especially as it impacts the prices of imported goods. Currently trading at around its all-time low, the rupee's decline typically results in higher costs for imports.

Despite this concern, the report notes promising indicators for inflation heading into the fourth quarter of 2024-25. With steady progress in Rabi sowing and a decrease in food prices, the food basket is expected to play a key role in driving down inflation. As of January, India's retail inflation stood at 4.3 per cent, marking a five-month low and remaining comfortably within the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) target range of 2-6 per cent.

The decline in food prices, particularly vegetables and pulses, has alleviated previous inflationary pressures that had troubled policymakers. While the RBI has maintained its 'Neutral' stance on monetary policy, the centra report suggests that future interest rate cuts will hinge on incoming macroeconomic data. Following a recent reduction of the repo rate by 25 basis points, there is scope for further decreases if inflation trends continue downwards. However, the report cautions that the impacts of a depreciating rupee on domestic prices must be closely monitored.



- The decline in food prices, particularly vegetables and pulses, has alleviated previous inflationary pressures that had troubled policymakers

Overall, Centrum anticipates inflation to average 4.8 per cent for the fiscal year 2024-25. *—ANI*

Producers urge extension of renewable waiver till 2030

The waiver saves renewable developers between Rs 0.4 and Rs 1.8 per unit, making green energy more competitive against fossil fuels *PHOTO*: X

NEW DELHI, 16 FEB

Power producers are urging the Indian government to extend the waiver on inter-state transmission charges for renewable energy until 2030, in an effort to bolster investment and support the nation's clean energy transition.

The appeal was made at a consultative meeting on 5 February, chaired by Minister for New and Renewable Energy Pralhad Joshi, where representatives from the Wind Independent Power Producers Association (WIPPA) expressed their concerns. Currently, the waiver for inter-state transmission system (ISTS) charges, which benefits solar, wind, and hybrid projects commissioned before 30 June, 2025, is set to end soon.

The waiver saves renewable developers between Rs 0.4 and Rs 1.8 per unit, making green energy more competitive against fossil fuels. If not extended, there are fears that tariffs will rise, hindering the viability of ongoing projects and potentially preventing the conversion of many letters of award into power purchase agreements.

- Officials report that the transmission charges currently amount to around Rs 52,691 crore annually, with the waiver only accounting for 7 per cent of this cost

Officials report that the transmission charges currently amount to around Rs 52,691 crore annually, with the waiver only accounting for 7 per cent of this cost.

Industry stakeholders argue that maintaining the waiver is crucial for achieving India's ambitious goal of reaching 500 GW of renewable energy capacity. *—PTI*

Experts: Infra, upskilling key to small-city talent

NEW DELHI, 16 FEB

The rise of remote IT work is creating significant opportunities for professionals in India's Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities, prompting calls for increased investment in digital infrastructure and upskilling initiatives.

Experts have praised the government's decision to establish five National Centres of Excellence for Skilling, aimed at aligning youth capabilities with market demands.

Atul Soneja, COO of Tech Mahindra, highlighted that remote work not only expands earning potential but also fosters inclusive growth. He emphasised the need for robust digital infrastructure and continuous skill development to connect regional talent with global projects.

PHOTO: PTI

Ganesh Gopalan, CEO of Gnani.ai, underscored the importance of reliable internet and upskilling programmes for tapping into the talent in smaller cities. Pawan Gupta, CTO of SkillsCapital, noted that their AI-Powered Talent Cloud platform aims to integrate these professionals into the global tech ecosystem, enhancing local economies and career growth without relocation.

Experts also welcomed the Rs 500-crore Centre of Excellence for AI in Education as a means to equip IT professionals with essential skills for global competitiveness. *—PTI*

MANUFACTURING HUB

Japanese firms eye India as part of 'China Plus One' strategy

NEW DELHI, 16 FEB

In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, Japanese firms are increasingly targeting India as a manufacturing hub, driven by the 'China Plus One' strategy aimed at diversifying supply chains and reducing reliance on China, experts from Deloitte have reported.

Deloitte Japan CEO Kenichi Kimura highlighted that while some companies have returned to Japan, many are viewing India not just as a manufacturing base but as a gateway to high-growth markets in the Middle East and Africa. The vast scale of India's domestic market and its established business and talent networks were highlighted as attractive factors.

"The 'China Plus One' strategy has led Japanese companies to explore investments in India, significantly bolstered by the Japanese government's support and funding for relocating production to Southeast Asia or back home," Deloitte South Asia CEO Romal Shetty noted, adding that India has recently surpassed China as the largest destination for Japanese foreign direct investment (FDI).

PHOTO: PTI

Data revealed that Japan's FDI in China has plummeted from USD 13 billion in 2012 to approximately USD 3 billion in 2023, while investment in India has surged to USD 6 billion, illustrating a notable shift.

- Data revealed that Japan's FDI in China has plummeted from USD 13 billion in 2012 to approximately USD 3 billion in 2023, while investment in India has surged to USD 6 billion

The trend extends to acquisitions, with over 200 inbound deals between Japan and India reported in the past decade. Both Kimura and Shetty emphasised the growing interest of Japanese firms in India's dynamic startup ecosystem, recognising its potential for innovation and scalability, particularly in sectors such as fintech and digital solutions. *—PTI*

Sports Minister urges youth to commute by cycle

MUMBAI, 16 FEB

Union Sports Minister Mansukh Mandaviya on Sunday urged the youngsters of the country to use cycles as a commuting option whenever possible to remain healthy and promote a better environment. Mandaviya led Fit India Movement's flagship programme, Sundays on Cycle, here this morning with an aim to create awareness among the masses to lead a fit and healthy lifestyle through cycling, while also promoting a solution for pollution. The ride was flagged off from the Gateway of India with more than 500 cyclists. —*PTI*

PHOTO:PTI

MI sign Mujeeb Ur Rahman in place of injured Ghazanfar

MUMBAI, 16 FEB

Five-time champions Mumbai Indians on Sunday announced the signing of Afghanistan off-spinner Mujeeb Ur Rahman as a replacement for Allah Ghazanfar who has been ruled out of the IPL 2025 due to an injury. The 18-year-old Afghan spinner had suffered a fracture in the L4 vertebra, specifically in the left pars interarticularis, and he will miss the upcoming Champions Trophy as well. Ghazanfar had sustained the injury during Afghanistan's recent tour to Zimbabwe. Mujeeb was one of the youngest ever players to have represented Afghanistan and made an instant impact, leading to an IPL debut at the age of 17. Mumbai Indians had signed the rising 18-year-old off-spinner Ghazanfar for Rs 4.80 crore in the IPL mega auction. —*PTI*

LIV Tour commits to Adelaide match until 2031

ADELAIDE, 16 FEB

LIV Golf has secured its foothold in Australia, with Adelaide retaining hosting rights for its tournament until 2031, despite increasing speculation of a reunification of the PGA and LIV tours and what that could mean for the sport's landscape. Sunday's announcement signals LIV's ambitions to remain a prominent player in world golf despite increasing efforts to reunify the PGA and LIV Golf tours, which included PGA Tour Commissioner Jay Monahan meeting with President Donald Trump last week. Adelaide's hosting contract with LIV Golf had been due to end after its fourth event in 2026, but with around 100,000 fans attending in each of the past two years it prompted the South Australian state government to bid for an extension. —*PTI*

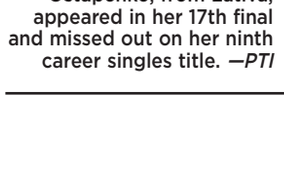


PHOTO:X

Anisimova beats Ostapenko, wins Qatar Open final

DOHA, 16 FEB

Amanda Anisimova won the Qatar Open on Saturday for her third career title and first since 2022. Anisimova beat former French Open champion Jelena Ostapenko 6-4, 6-3 in a final disrupted twice by showers. After the second rain delay, Anisimova won the last three games to become the first American to win the Doha title since Monica Seles in 2002. "It was actually quite stressful, especially with the rain, at 3-3," Anisimova said. "I was trying to stay focused. There's not much that either of us could do with the conditions. I'm happy that it went my way." The 37th-ranked Ostapenko, from Lativa, appeared in her 17th final and missed out on her ninth career singles title. —*PTI*

Gambhir, Agarkar reportedly clash over selection decisions

Disagreement centres around selection of Shreyas & Pant

NEW DELHI, 16 FEB

A heated argument between head coach Gautam Gambhir and chief selector Ajit Agarkar over team selection has stirred controversy within the Indian cricket management ahead of the ICC Champions Trophy. Reports suggest that the disagreement centres around the selection of Shreyas Iyer and Rishabh Pant, adding uncertainty to India's middle-order strategy.

Team India's dominant 3-0 ODI series sweep against England has instilled confidence ahead of the tournament. With Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli showing signs of returning to form, the team management can breathe a sigh of relief. However, concerns over the middle-order persist, with Gambhir and Agarkar reportedly not on the same page.

When India's preliminary Champions Trophy squad was announced, Agarkar labeled Rishabh Pant as the team's No. 1 wicketkeeper. However, Pant did not feature in any of the three ODIs against England. After the series, Gambhir contradicted Agarkar's statement, asserting that KL Rahul is India's first-choice wicketkeeper in ODIs. The mixed messaging from the management has raised eyebrows.

The selection of Shreyas Iyer has also been a point of contention. Initially, the team intended to bench him in the first ODI, opting for Yashasvi Jaiswal at the top. However, an injury to Kohli led to Iyer being included at No. 3, where he responded with a fiery half-century. His strong performance secured his place in the remaining matches, but reports suggest internal disagreements over his role in the squad.

Harshit Rana has been the flavour of the season as far as India's emerging crop of fast bowlers is concerned but one of head coach Gautam Gambhir's finds is unlikely to start in India's playing eleven in the Champions Trophy with Arshdeep Singh still considered way ahead in terms of talent and quality.

The Indian team management gave Harshit all three ODIs against England, and if one is absolutely fair to the burly 6-feet-2-inch tall Delhi speedster, he has not looked out of place.

—*PTI with agencies*

IPL SCHEDULE

KKR vs RCB to kick off on 22 March in Kolkata

NEW DELHI, 16 FEB

The BCCI on Sunday unveiled a 74-match schedule for the 18th Indian Premier League that will be held across 13 venues, starting on 22 March with three franchises playing at least a couple of their home games at their designated second bases.

The event will kick off with a clash between Kolkata Knight Riders and Royal Challengers Bengaluru at Eden Gardens on 22 March and culminate at the same venue on 25 May in a schedule that did not offer any surprises.

A schedule features 12 double-headers. The games will be held over 65 days across 13 venues, with Dharamsala, Guwahati, and Visakhapatnam hosting a couple of IPL fixtures each.

As has been the norm, Dharamsala will serve as Punjab Kings' second home venue alongside Mullanpur (New Chandigarh), while Rajasthan Royals will make Guwahati their base in addition to Jaipur.

Delhi Capitals will have Visakhapatnam as their second home venue and will start their league campaign there on March 24 against Lucknow Super Giants.

Guwahati and Visakhapatnam will host two matches each, while Dharamsala will stage three matches.

The first double-header of the season will be held on 23 March in which Sunrisers Hyderabad will face Rajasthan Royals in an afternoon game in Hyderabad, followed by a contest between Chennai Super Kings and Mumbai Indians at the MA Chidambaram Stadium in Chennai.

The playoffs will be staged in Hyderabad and Kolkata after the league stage. —*PTI*

Aditi finishes Saudi Int'l at 53

RIYADH, 16 FEB

Aditi Ashok played a disappointing round of 3-over 75 and slipped to tied-53rd at the Saudi Ladies International on Sunday. Aditi with rounds of 69-72-75 totalled even par 216 for three days.

It was a tough day with two birdies, three bogeys and a double bogey in the 75 at the Par-72 Riyadh Golf Club. This was Ashok's first event of 2025 on the Ladies European Tour.

The other three Indians, Pranavi Urs, Diksha Dagar and Tvesa Malik had missed the cut earlier on.

Thailand's Jeeno Thitikul secured her fifth Ladies European Tour (LET) title after storming to a four-stroke victory. The Thai star, who is number four in the Women's World Golf Rankings, began the day with a three-shot lead. A round of 69 (-3) on the final day to end the week with a score of 16-under-par was more than enough to ensure Thitikul began her 2025 season in the best way.

Korea's Somi Lee finished the week in second place with a score of 12-under-par after she captained her team to victory. England's Annabell Fuller recorded her best-ever finish on the LET with solo third place on 11-under-par.

The LET season has a two-week break before a trip to Australia with the first of three events – the Australian WPGA Championship – taking place from 6-9 March at Sanctuary Cove. —*PTI*

MATCH TODAY

RCB's batting depth edges out DC at WPL

PHOTO: PTI

VADODARA, 16 FEB

After contrasting successes in their opening matches, Royal Challengers Bengaluru (RCB) and Delhi Capitals are poised to strengthen their standings in the Women's Premier League (WPL) 2025 when they meet on Monday.

Defending champions RCB decisively defeated Gujarat Giants by six wickets, while Delhi Capitals triumphed over Mumbai Indians in a nail-biting finish. RCB holds a slight advantage, particularly with their robust batting line-up, expertly led by Smriti Mandhana, who efficiently chased down a 200-plus target against Gujarat.

RCB has been further enhanced by promising new talents such as Raghavi Bist and Kanika Ahuja, who have integrated well with seasoned players like Ellyse Perry and Richa Ghosh. However, RCB will need to tighten their bowling, especially in Perry's absence due to a hip injury.

Conversely, Delhi boasts a formidable batting unit, featuring skipper Meg Lanning and rising stars like Shafali Verma and Jemimah Rodrigues. Despite a lacklustre performance in their last match, they aim to capitalise on RCB's inexperienced bowling attack.

The encounter is anticipated to deliver an exciting and competitive showdown. —*PTI*

Sinner's doping ban stirs controversy

LONDON, 16 FEB

Top-ranked Jannik Sinner's acceptance of a three-month doping ban has drawn sharp criticism from fellow tennis professionals. Sinner and the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) reached a settlement allowing him to return to play on 5 May, keeping his No. 1 ranking and retaining titles and prize money earned since a positive test for a banned anabolic steroid last March.

Three-time Grand Slam champion Stan Wawrinka expressed his disillusionment on X, stating, "I don't believe in a clean sport anymore." Wimbledon runner-up Nick Kyrgios echoed similar sentiments, questioning fairness in tennis and criticising Sinner's lack of penalties. "Guilty or not? Sad day for tennis," he wrote.

Daniil Medvedev, ranked No. 8, remarked following his loss in the Open 13 semifinals, "I hope everyone can discuss with WADA and defend themselves like Jannik Sinner from now on."

Former British No. 1 Tim Henman called the situation "convenient," suggesting the timing of Sinner's ban following his Australian Open victory seemed oddly fortuitous. The Professional Tennis Players Association condemned the decision-making process. —*PTI*

Spain beat Germany in Women's League

BHUBANESWAR, 16 FEB

Spain secured a narrow 2-1 victory over Germany in an intense contest in the FIH women's Pro League. A third-quarter strike from Luciana Molina proved to be the difference as Spain held on to claim full points.

Germany started strongly, with Aina Kresken opening the scoring just over a minute into the game, giving her side an early 1-0 lead. However, Spain responded before the end of the first quarter, as Sofia Rogoski found the back of the net to level the score.

The second quarter saw a green card issued to Spain's Clara Badia but both teams struggled to break the deadlock, heading into halftime on level terms.

Spain register back-to-back wins over Germany in their FIH Pro League encounters in Bhubaneswar **PHOTO: X**

Spain took the lead in the third quarter when Molina capitalised on an opportunity in the 38th minute, making it 2-1. Spain's defence held firm to deny Germany an equaliser. —*PTI*

Jeev faces tough day at Marbella Legends

MARBELLA, 16 FEB

Jeev Milkha Singh had a challenging second round at the Marbella Legends, posting a 1-over 73. The Indian golfer, now competing in his third season on the Legends Tour, started strong with a 68 on the opening day but slipped from T-12 to T-19, finishing the 36 holes at 3-under par.

Simon Griffiths is leading the tournament with a total of 11-under after rounds of 65 and 68, while Colin Montgomerie, who shot a 70, follows closely at 9-under.

In his round, Jeev began with a birdie on the third hole but quickly relinquished that advantage.

Griffiths reached the summit after a strong back nine, while Montgomerie rebounded from an early double bogey to secure a commendable round. Local favourite Miguel Angel Jimenez remains in contention at 8-under, alongside Keith Horne and Lionel Alexandre —*PTI*

Bellingham's red card costs Madrid at Osasuna

BARCELONA, 16 FEB

Real Madrid's title hopes took a hit as they drew 1-1 with Osasuna after Jude Bellingham was sent off for swearing at the referee. Kylian Mbappé had given the visitors an early lead in the 15th minute, marking his 11th goal in as many league matches. However, Bellingham received a straight red card shortly before half-time for using an expletive while protesting a decision.

Osasuna equalised in the second half from the penalty spot, awarded after a VAR review, when Eduardo Camavinga fouled Ante Budimir. Budimir converted the penalty in the 58th minute, leading to jubilant celebrations at El Sadar Stadium.

The result leaves Real Madrid's lead precarious; Barcelona could level on points if they defeat Rayo Vallecano on Monday. —*PTI*

The result leaves Real Madrid's lead precarious; Barcelona could level on points if they defeat Rayo Vallecano on Monday **PHOTO: X**

RANJI TROPHY

Gujarat favoured in semi-final against Kerala

AHMEDABAD, 16 FEB

Former champions Gujarat are expected to dominate as they face Kerala in the Ranji Trophy semi-final starting on Monday. Gujarat, who last lifted the trophy in the 2016-17 season, advanced to the semis for the first time since 2019-20 after a commanding victory over Saurashtra by an innings and 98 runs in the quarter-finals.

Key players for Gujarat include Manan Hingrajia and Jaymeet Patel, alongside wicketkeeper Urvil Patel, who recently scored his maiden first-class century of 140 runs. Jaymeet has been the side's top scorer this season with 582 runs, closely followed by Hingrajia with 570 runs.

Kerala, captained by Sachin Baby, hopes to achieve their dream of reaching a historic final.

They secured a semi-final spot after a tense quarter-final against Jammu & Kashmir, where they claimed victory through a narrow first-innings lead. Salman Nizar and Mohammed Azharuddeen anchored the innings during a crucial seventh-wicket partnership.

Bowling spearhead MD Nidheesh stood out in the previous match, picking up ten wickets, while spin bowler Jalaj Saxena has also been instrumental with 34 wickets at an impressive average. Kerala aims to maintain their momentum, setting the stage for an exciting clash against the formidable Gujarat side. —*PTI*

Kerala aims to maintain their momentum, setting the stage for an exciting clash against the formidable Gujarat side **PHOTO: X**

Jaiswal set to miss Ranji semis against Vidarbha

NAGPUR, 16 FEB

Defending champions Mumbai are firm favourites heading into their Ranji Trophy semi-final against Vidarbha, commencing on Monday. There are concerns surrounding the availability of Yashasvi Jaiswal, who is likely to visit the BCCI Centre of Excellence in Bengaluru for further evaluation of an unspecified injury. Despite this, Mumbai boasts an impressive roster, including skipper Ajinkya Rahane, Suryakumar Yadav, Shivam Dube, and Shardul Thakur, all capable of turning the tide of the match.

Although Mumbai's top-order has faced challenges this season, their lower-order has displayed remarkable resilience, notably in their quarterfinal against Haryana, where Shams Mulani and Tanush Kotian salvaged a precarious 113 for seven with a partnership of 183 runs for the eighth wicket.

Vidarbha, riding high on form, may lack star power in their bowling attack but are led by the competition's leading wicket-taker, left-arm spinner Harsh Dubey, who has 59 scalps this season.

While none of Mumbai's batters feature among the top 20 run-scorers this season, Vidarbha's Yash Rathod occupies the fourth spot with 728 runs. The match starts at 9.30am, promising an exciting showdown. —*PTI*